Beijing's Campaign for a Greater Global Leadership Role

A Study in the Tactics of Global Opposition Party Politics

The conventional literature on power transitions warns that a rising challenger may seek to dethrone the established power by launching a devasting great power war. We believe the contemporary international environment is different from that of the past, creating incentives to avoid a major conflagration and instead employ a strategy of seeking leadership by amassing international support and improving institutional standing. Given these strategic aims, as a rising power the People's Republic of China (PRC) is therefore more likely to adopt tactics analogous to a domestic opposition party: promoting an alternative political programme with slogans and manifestos; seeking a greater institutional presence and building support with coalitions and patronage relationships; and using political communications to portray itself positively in contrast to the incumbent power. Surveying three domains of PRC behaviour, we indeed find indications that it is engaging in a form of what we label global opposition party politics. While this does not explain the entirety of the PRC's international activity, it does shed light on the tactics it is using to pursue a greater international leadership role.

Classic arguments about power transitions suggest that with growing capabilities a state may develop revisionist aims, putting it on a collision course with the established power.[1] The logic is simple and intuitive—should the rising power become increasingly discontent with its inferior status and an international order that serves the interests of the established power, it will work to overturn existing arrangements to secure benefits and status more commensurate with its newfound capabilities. Where the established power resists this, there exists the danger of a devastating major-power war.

While many of these arguments were developed decades ago—primarily with reference to the European experience—of late their logics have experienced a revival in the context of the increasing power and ambitions of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Will the PRC turn revisionist or be content with the status quo? Is the PRC behaving like belligerent rising powers of the past? Are the PRC and the United States on a path towards war over leadership of the international system? All these are questions provoked by viewing the PRC through the conceptual lenses of the power transitions literature.

We believe that the international environment of today diverges in crucial ways from the world which gave rise to the power transitions literature. The international system is now vastly more institutionalised with a membership far larger and more diverse. Moreover, given technological developments, launching a global great power war now would likely be suicidal. International leadership is no longer a crown to be won through a contest of might.

Consequently, a rising power desirous of a greater international leadership role and changes to the international system—as is the contemporary PRC—is incentivised to pursue these goals through amassing international support and increasing its global institutional presence and status. This is not the path of violent rising powers prior. If anything, analogically speaking, this means the PRC is most likely to adopt a strategy akin to a domestic opposition part, working within existing institutional structures to challenge an incumbent by building support for its alternative leadership bid.

In this piece, we justify and build upon this analogy to explicitly make the case for viewing key aspects of the PRC's international behaviour as a form of "global opposition party politics." Ours offers a clear alternative to power transition theory and suggests an identifiable collection of tactics employed by the PRC in its role as the global opposition party. These tactics include: (1) the promotion of manifestos, slogans, and a general political programme; (2) the use of a set of institutional, coalitional, and clientelist tactics to increase international support and standing; and (3) the deployment of overt and covert political communications to paint the PRC and the United States in a highly contrasting fashion. Of course, this analogy has its limits, particularly when considering PRC conduct regarding perceived core interests. Nevertheless, we believe the analogy does offer a compelling logic for key facets of the PRC's global behaviour.

In what follows we begin by discussing the power transitions logic as it has been applied to the PRC. We then make the case—given both environmental conditions and the

PRC's attributes as an actor—for an alternative logic, one which derives insights from an analogy with domestic opposition parties. We illustrate the implications of our arguments by examining three broad domains of the PRC's international behaviour. We conclude by reviewing our arguments and their limits.

OF RISING POWERS & POWER TRANSITIONS

As the PRC rises, it may seek to aggressively revise the international system to better reflect its newfound power and status, thereby putting it on a path towards a potential violent collision the United States. Such is the warning proffered by the power transitions logic when applied to the PRC. One high-profile voice for such concern is Allison, who—drawing upon the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' observation that, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable"—has repackaged and sharpened the power transition logic under the label of the "Thucydides Trap".[2] His view is that "war between the US and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized."[3] Allison's arguments have not only elicited numerous scholarly responses,[4] they have also been referenced in official statements by and dialogues between Washington and Beijing, even provoking an explicit rebuttal from PRC leader Xi Jinping himself.[5]

Indeed, the influence of the power transitions logic is quite pervasive, suppling many of the analytical categories and frameworks employed in debates over PRC motives, strategies, and behaviours.[6] Countless scholars and analysts have sought to distinguish whether the PRC is status quo or revisionist, scrutinising its relationship with the existing international order (or orders).[7] Others have parsed the similarity of the PRC's situation to other rising powers, such as Imperial Germany at the beginning of the last century[8] And yet others have interrogated the applicability of the power transition logic to the PRC, suggesting that it is the United States that is actually revisionist,[9] that the actual danger is that the PRC's

power has peaked,[10] or that the PRC can be the exception that rises peacefully.[11] Even where their conclusions differ, these scholars still find themselves engaging in a discussion where the power transitions logic has set the terms of engagement and baseline expectations.

Granted, it is indisputable the PRC presently has more diplomatic influence,[12] economic clout,[13] and military capabilities[14] than any other potential state challenger to the United States. Regional flashpoints also exist where the possibility for war between the United States and the PRC is very real.[15] And the PRC has not hidden its discontent with the United States.[16] All these point to the need to discern if and what type of leadership contest we may be facing.

But at the same time, adopting the framing supplied by the power transitions literature —even to contest its logic—may also limit our ability to make sense of what is presently unfolding. Consider the core power transition theory concepts of dissatisfaction and revisionist behaviour.[17] Dissatisfaction need not be a binary or even continuous variable. State actors could value certain elements of the status quo, while still preferring to adjust or overwrite others.[18] Moreover, if revisionism is anything that alters the status quo, even increasing foreign trade could be considered revisionist. Even where state actors are highly dissatisfied, numerous different strategies exist to effect change.

In what follows, we offer an alternative framework that focuses on the strategy a rising power might adopt in this day and age to achieve a greater leadership position within the international system. We do perceive an emerging challenge to the United States' leadership from the PRC. But at present it is not of the type feared by Allison, a do-or-die hegemonic struggle. Rather, it is a different style of challenge, that which we label "global opposition party politics."

Part 1: The International Environment

We begin with the observation that leadership challenges are shaped by the context within which they unfold. Ours, therefore, is in part a story of the contemporary international environment. The archetypical system-level power transitions that resulted in war unfolded in a pre-nuclear world where great power war was perceived to be winnable, the institutional structure of the international system comparatively thin, and membership in international society still highly circumscribed. Times have changed. We are in a world where flirting with system-level war is an invitation to nuclear apocalypse, where the international system is a thicket of different institutions and organisations, and where the processes of decolonisation have vastly increased the membership and diversity of international society. These three factors shape the rewards, risks, and strategies now available to rising powers.

To elaborate, first, fears a revisionist state would resort to a system-level war out of dissatisfaction with the current international system appear somewhat anachronistic in light of developments since World War II[19], above all the proliferation of nuclear weapons.[20] Given current technologies, a system-level war would now likely invite the mutual annihilation of its protagonists. This does not eliminate the possibility of local wars; on the contrary, faith in the stability of nuclear deterrence to limit a conflict may actually increase their likelihood.[21] But local wars are different from all-out wars to overturn the international system. Quite simply, a system-level war to dethrone an existing hegemon would not just be unwinnable, it would most likely be suicidal.

Second, the international realm is now far more institutionalised. The complex mix of organisations, institutions, and established practices that comprise it would be extraordinarily difficult to completely dismantle and extraordinarily costly to reconstitute.[22] There is no

simple reset button. Even if a rising power did dethrone the existing hegemon, dismembering existing forms of order and constructing its own would still entail massive effort and expense.

This changes the calculus of potential benefits. It incentivises rising state actors to focus on reorienting and repurposing existing institutions for their own aims and interests. This does not exclude also complementing existing arrangements with additional creations. But even if the international institutional landscape is not as the rising state actor would have designed if presented a blank slate, attempting to wipe the current slate clean makes little sense. The system is simply far too entrenched—along with the expectations of a plethora of international actors that participate in it—to make such an effort worthwhile. Moreover, having risen within such a system, there are likely to be beneficial aspects the rising power will wish to retain.

Third, international leadership requires the support of a broad group of states. Power transition theory broadly treats hegemony over the international system as a prize won through a contest of might, resolved when one side either concedes or is vanquished. Apart from the problem of systemic war now being suicidal, such an approach also assumes other states would simply fall into line as obedient followers upon the conclusion of such a test by battle. As discussions of the institutional,[23] normative,[24] and social[25] bases of hegemony and international order demonstrate, international leadership now depends upon the acquiescence if not acceptance of a significant base of other international actors. And decolonisation has vastly increased the contemporary size and diversity of membership in the international system. Bluntly, one cannot lead without followers, and followers must be won. Attaining international leadership now is not just a matter of ascending a pre-existing throne by forcibly removing its current occupant.

These are three major features of the contemporary international environment that shape the incentives facing rising powers such as the PRC. To be clear, we are not arguing

that these features have eliminated war within the international system or resolved the problems of international anarchy.[26] Rather, it is the simpler claim that for rising powers wishing to make a bid for a larger leadership role, attain greater status, and possibly shape the international system more to their liking, the current equation of costs and benefits encourages a different strategic approach from that of belligerent powers past.

Part 2: Actor Attributes

Ours is also a story reliant upon certain rising power attributes. First, as Miller has observed, rising powers are constituted as such by their intentions to assume a larger international role.[27] For our story, the rising power must desire a greater leadership role, otherwise there would be no challenge. Second, the rising power must be receptive to international incentives to work within existing institutional frameworks as opposed to being a “spoiler” (that is disruptive of international order—as arguably is Russia now) or a “shirker” (sitting on the sidelines).[28] Third, the rising power should not be an unmitigated supporter of the existing arrangements, as this would diminish competition between it and the hegemon, resulting in more accommodative and cooperative relations. The PRC does appear to match these characteristics.

First, the PRC appears to want a larger leadership role and status within the international system. As Xi Jinping has stated in what have been termed the "three unprecedenteds": "we have moved in an unprecedented manner closer to the centre of the world stage, become unprecedentedly close to realising the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people, we possess an unprecedented ability and confidence to realise this goal."[29] He has further stated that he anticipates that "China will become the leading country" and that "the Chinese nation will stand mightily among the world of nations and do so in higher spirit."[30]

Second, the PRC leadership has repeatedly stated its support for the basic institutional structure underpinning the current international order. The notion the PRC is a spoiler intent on overturning the international system may have pertained during bouts of revolutionary fervour within the Maoist era, but such a view is less plausible given the degree to which the PRC is presently invested in and voices support for the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and other key international institutions.[31] And it is difficult to simply label the PRC a shirker, given its investments in terms of infrastructure and development, not to mention its involvement in UN peacekeeping.[32]

Third, the PRC is not, however, an unmitigated supporter; it clearly takes exception with certain elements of the contemporary international system—particularly in the realm of political values—and has expressed discontent with US leadership.[33] Arguably, one might posit the PRC simply aspires to an international system more conducive to preserving the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Indeed, some scholars argue that domestic regime security is the primary driver for the PRC's foreign policy.[34] For our purposes here—regardless of whether its motives are self-serving, principled, or some combination thereof—what is important is that the PRC is advocating positions that put it at odds with the United States. But as we elaborate below, the PRC also takes international stances that appear to extend beyond narrow self-interests.

To summarise, the PRC is rising in world very unlike that which witnessed past violent power transitions. The contemporary international environment creates strong disincentives against great power war and strong incentives for states to work with or within existing institutional structures and pursue leadership through amassing followership. The PRC does appear to be seeking a greater leadership position, but as of this writing it does not show signs of being a revolutionary power trying to overthrow the present system. It has

issues with current arrangements and wishes to see change, but at the same time is a strong advocate of UN centrality and the preservation of a WTO-based trading system.

Part 3: The Case for Analogical Reasoning

To summarise our arguments so far, we are not proposing that the PRC differs from previous rising powers in wanting a larger leadership role, greater status, and a system that more reflects its wishes. We observe, however, that changes in the international environment mean that attempting to achieve this via violently toppling the existing hegemon and fully dismantling the existing institutional structure would be prohibitively costly, if not suicidal. This, in our view, incentivises a different type of strategy, a strategy that seeks to gain leadership not through violent struggle but through amassing followership, a strategy that seeks change and greater status through improving one's institutional standing and international support. But what tactics accompany such a strategy? To better understand this, we argue that we should look to other analogous actors that also seek greater followership and institutional standing and influence within their respective environments. Those actors are domestic opposition parties.

What makes a domestic opposition party? An opposition party stands against the ruling party, offers political and policy alternatives, and seeks a greater leadership role to influence decision-making processes.[35] Precisely, our treatment of the PRC as analogous to a domestic opposition party rests on five points of similarity. First, an opposition party is engaged in a contest for leadership. It seeks a higher political position and participates in politics to those ends. Second, the opposition's strategy does not entail forcibly deposing the existing leadership through the use of force. Rather, it relies on political campaigns instead of revolutionary violence. Third, this strategy broadly involves working within existing institutions, even if the party seeks significant changes to their operation. Fourth, ideological and value differences with the ruling party motivate the opposition's pursuit of power. In

other words, it seeks change. Fifth, the key means for the opposition to obtain power is by winning the support of potential constituents: a strategy of leadership through gaining followership.

To be clear, we recognise that domestic opposition parties can take a variety of forms. At its core, opposition implies a political relationship in which one actor stands in disagreement with another and seeks to challenge the status quo. A domestic opposition party can pursue this challenge through two broad approaches: by attempting to dismantle existing institutions or by working within them. When extended to the international context, power transition theory associates rising challenger states with the former. In contrast, we argue that the PRC is best understood as analogous to the latter—a "constitutional opposition" party.[36] Such a party accepts the legitimacy of the existing system and seeks to attain leadership within it in order to advance its alternative agenda through established institutional structures.

We therefore understand domestic opposition parties, in this context, as actors seeking leadership not by armed struggle but by aiming to amass the broadest base of support possible and increase their institutional standing. The PRC is also an actor seeking a greater leadership position within an environment that incentivises such a strategic approach. Our case for analogical reasoning lies in the proposition that these similar strategies impel similar tactics, and that by looking to the behaviour of domestic opposition parties we can understand PRC behaviour in a new light. To be absolutely clear, nothing here posits that PRC policymakers consciously think of themselves as analogous to a domestic opposition party, or that the international and domestic realms are in any larger way broadly equivalent. Our claims are much more limited, namely that certain strategic approaches will engender certain tactics, and we can learn analogically from actors pursuing similar strategies.

Our analogy thus only goes so far. We are not in way positing an international realm where anarchy is overcome, where states constitute a pacified demos with shared values

under the rule of shared institutions and law. Nor are we suggesting there is anything like a recurrent global election for the position of hegemon. For domestic opposition parties, to win is to gain control of government. And domestic opposition parties are likely experience peaks and troughs in their activity depending on the proximity of electoral contests. For the PRC within the international setting, there is no straightforward indicator of such a win, but rather a more nebulous increase in its ability to shape the international agenda and normative landscape, persevere in certain institutional settings, and be internationally recognised as a global leader. And correspondingly, with international leadership being something that is subjectively and intersubjectively constituted--as opposed being a clear institutional position one occupies--the PRC is thus more likely to be in permanent campaign mode.[37] Ours therefore is not a claim of one-to-one equivalence between the domestic and international realms. All we are saying is that the similarities of strategy for attaining leadership suggest parallels in terms of tactics.

Crucially, the desires for a greater leadership role, increased status, and changes to the international system are also not the only drivers of the PRC's behaviour on the international stage. The PRC also has a set of repeatedly enunciated core interests[38] (核心利益) and red lines[39] that it views as central concerns. These include the status of Taiwan, territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, interpretations of international law as pertains to US activity in the PRC's surrounding waters and airspace, and more. For these, arguably, distinctive strategic logics prevail.[40] Here the costs and benefits of potentially using force are different, and the PRC appears to be building military capabilities oriented towards such contingencies.[41] Correspondingly, in domains of security and territorial issues more central to the PRC leadership,[42] the analogy does not apply. We fully recognise war between the United States and the PRC over such issues as a distinct possibility. But our focus is the logics guiding the PRC in the tactics it is adopting in its global leadership challenge, not in its

behaviour in regional security issues and disputes concerning perceived core interests. For the former, we believe the analogy does provide analytical purchase.

In proposing this analogy, we are thus highlighting a strategy for mounting an international leadership bid in the contemporary international environment and then theorising the tactics to which this would give rise. We are thereby also offering an additional perspective for making sense of PRC behaviour beyond the categories Pu and Schweller offer of spoiler, supporter, and shirker.[43] The combinations the PRC presents of systemic challenger and supporter, contributor and detractor, proactive advocate for change and reactive and reluctant participant in international disputes all make greater sense—as shall be detailed below—from the perspective of seeing the PRC behaviour as analogous to that of a global opposition party.

How would one falsify our claims? One could argue that the PRC is not seeking a greater leadership role within the international system, but this seems to be clearly at odds with both what the PRC is saying and the efforts and resources it is investing in having a presence and voice in international settings, bolstering its global image, and building international support. The more significant critique would be one that claims the PRC is pursuing a different strategy with alternative tactics--such as preparing for a systemic war as waged by previous rising powers or seeking to destabilise the system through revolutionary tactics. While--as noted above--the PRC is building up its military, Mastro observes at present, "China is unlikely to strive for nuclear parity with the United States, form traditional military alliances, or build an overseas basing network that facilitates foreign military interventions."[44] Neither does the PRC appear to be working to destabilise the system by fuelling proxy wars, arming militants, or spreading a revolutionary ideology as was the case in the Cold War.

In short, if we treat the PRC as a rising power that is pursuing an international leadership bid via amassing followership and greater institutional status, in our view this circumscribes the tactics it will likely adopt. We label these "global opposition party politics." In the following section, we draw further inspiration from the analogy of domestic opposition party politics to delineate in greater detail the tactics we should observe.

GLOBAL OPPOSITION PARTY TACTICS

Our basic premise is that an analogous strategic approach will encourage similar tactics. The literature on opposition actors identifies three main strategies that these actors use within institutions: presenting alternatives, seeking to increase influence and gain followers within existing institutions, and criticising the incumbent actor.[45] We translate these into three domains where we would expect to see opposition tactics play out internationally: the PRC's political manifestos, slogans, and programme; the PRC's institutional, coalitional, and clientelist behaviour; and the PRC's international communications. We address each in turn.

Part 1: The PRC's Opposition Manifestos, Slogans, & Programme

In 2023, the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the "Proposal of the People's Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance".[46] It did not contain anything particularly surprising in its positions. But it is of interest for what it communicated by its very existence. The proposal was representative of how the PRC has assumed opposition party tactics in the form of issuing manifestos, using slogans, and presenting a political programme.[47]

Precisely, the paper did not simply outline the PRC's positions on issues related to its own core interests. To cite a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, it elaborated "China's position and proposition on global security, development, human rights and social, and new frontiers governance as well as on reform of multilateral institutions…";[48] it furthermore put forward

“its latest stances and proposals about the Ukraine crisis, the nuclear issues of Iran and the Korean Peninsula, the Afghanistan issue, the Palestine-Israel conflict, as well as the issues of Syria, Sudan, Libya and Yemen."[49] This “Proposal” was much more than an attempt to clothe parochial interests in language appealing to a broader audience; it outlined the way forward on a plethora of issues, many of which were not directly connected to the PRC’s regional concerns or core interests. And it was clearly addressed to developing countries, evident in its repeated advocacy for “increasing the voice of developing countries in international affairs.”[50]

Vital to mounting a leadership challenge is presenting an alternative vision and policy proposals that appeal to those who are dissatisfied with current circumstances or can be persuaded that something better exists. In short, an opposition party needs to produce manifestos. Within electoral democracies, “It is possible to conceive of a manifesto as a contract, an advertisement, or a statement of principle…”[51] While contract-style manifestos offer a “realistic assessment of policies which [parties] could implement if elected,” advertisement-style manifestos “may be prone to an exaggeration of policy differences, and a proliferation of vague or unrealistic promises”; and identity-style manifestos “serve as a statement of the party’s identity and philosophy.”[52] The PRC’s “Proposal” had elements of all three. On issues where the PRC had clear actions it could take—such as providing development aid—we see definite policy pledges. On more intractable issues—such as Ukraine and Palestine—it adopted vague language advocating peace without offering concrete paths to achieving these. And more generally, the “Proposal” conveyed a consistent message about the PRC’s identity and philosophy as distinct from Western countries concerning issues such as human rights and development. The ”Proposal” thus was much more in the style of an opposition party manifesto than a statement for the purposes of traditional statecraft.

Importantly, embedded within PRC manifesto-style documents such as the “Proposal” are key slogans the PRC has been promoting internationally, first and foremost the “community with a shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体). While political manifestos lay out an opposition party’s positions and policies, slogans serve to “simplify complicated ideas, issues, or ideology of a group or movement."[53] They are a short hand for what candidates stand for and the ideas or values they are advancing. The PRC, of course, has a long domestic tradition of using political slogans,[54] and internationally oriented slogans certainly also serve diverse domestic purposes.[55] Previous PRC slogans—such as “China’s peaceful rise” (中国和平崛起) or “China’s peaceful development” (中国和平发展) sought to dispel fears about the PRC as a growing power. But the slogan, “community with a shared future for mankind,” importantly moves away from a focus on China. It even extends beyond the prior “harmonious world” (和谐世界) slogan that emphasised how the PRC would seek cooperative, constructive relations with others.[56] Instead, it has become the narrative spine for a collection of PRC initiatives addressing issues of security (the Global Security Initiative, 全球安全倡议)[57], development (the Global Development Initiative, 全球发展倡议)[58], and even civilisation and values (the Global Civilization Initiative, 全球文明倡议).[59] “Community with a shared future for mankind” is the PRC’s global campaign slogan, most prominently advanced by Xi, but repeated and elaborated upon by numerous other PRC officials and representatives.

The manifestos and slogans produced by the PRC are delivery vehicles for the larger political programme that it is developing. It is a programme proposing that international relations should be “democratised” so that no single mode of governance is privileged over others.[60] It posits that democratization of membership within the international order requires nations to interact on an equal footing, in contrast to its portrayal of the current order as a

hierarchical one led by a capricious United States. It advocates global governance reform, emphasizing the need for the UN to play a central role in international affairs.[61] This includes increased representation and influence for developing countries, especially those in Africa.[62] It refutes the current global security framework as a negative-sum game, instead proposing a positive-sum system in which “openness, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, equity and justice” are enjoyed by all participants.[63] It advances the self-autonomy of nations over a strict liberal “rules-based order”;[64] the right of each country to adopt its own path to development based on its “national conditions” rather than adhering to the democratic/capitalist model of development;[65] and a focus on international partnerships as opposed to a system of alliances.[66] And it is a programme that prioritises stability and development over political freedoms, dialogue over intervention, and sovereignty over human rights.

Again, one could argue that much of this is simply about “making the world safe for autocracy.”[67] In other words, the PRC is just seeking to promote an international programme that renders the world friendlier to its regime, and this is about narrow self-interest. If that were the case, however, why is the PRC now proclaiming that “We work hard to contribute China's wisdom and solutions to the cause of peace and development for all humanity…”[68]? Why is the PRC arguing for the "democratization of international affairs"?[69] The PRC is now advancing a programme that encompasses issues those that directly affect it and speak to a much larger global audience.

That being, much of this programme also still remains vague, and in many cases the PRC falls back upon bromides that are difficult to argue against: “Adhering to dialogue and consultation, build a world of lasting peace; adhering to mutual efforts and mutual rewards, build a world of common security for all; adhering to win-win cooperation, build a world of common prosperity; adhering to exchanges and mutual learning, build an open and inclusive

world."[70]. But the PRC can afford to be vague—it is in an opposition position, which gives it the liberty to step up when it chooses, remain on the sidelines when not.

Traditional statecraft requires neither platitudinous slogans nor political manifestos. States can and do pursue policies that serve their interests without needing to offer expansive programmes for international reform. The PRC is engaging in something more than conventional realpolitik, using the opposition party tactics to make an appeal for its "responsibility and commitment as a major power (大国)."[71]. And at the same time, like politicians that tout a working-class background to show that they understand the concerns of the majority, the PRC continues to stress that it remains on the side of developing countries.[72] Much of its programme remains quite elusive in terms of detail, but that is one of the luxuries of still being in opposition.

Part 2: The PRC's Institutional Behaviour, Coalition Building, & Patronage Politics

Opposition parties do not only proffer manifestos, slogans, and political programmes, they also seek to enhance their political position and amass broad support. This involves a number of standard tactics. First, they work to increase their presence and influence in existing institutions, for example by taking on key committee positions.[73] Second, they aim to attract support by aligning with external auxiliary actors, such as trade unions, or creating new organisations to complement existing structures, consolidate their support base, build coalitions and provide controlled spaces to promote their policies or leadership.[74] Third, they may pursue patronage politics, endeavouring to win backers by providing or promising benefits. The PRC pursues versions of all of these.

First, similar to a domestic opposition party, the PRC is seeking to assume key positions within existing governance structures to establish itself as a viable and prominent

leader. It has, for instance, placed representatives in leadership roles across the UN, in positions such as the Judge of the International Court of Justice, the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the UN Under-Secretary-General and UNDP Associate Administrator, among numerous others.[75] As Fung and Lam note, “China is making a concerted effort to secure executive leadership posts within the UN international civil service, heading UN agencies located in the Senior Management Group and the Chief Executives Board.”[76] This is not limited to the UN—PRC efforts also extend to the World Bank, IMF, World Trade Organisation, G20, INTERPOL, and more.[77] Together, these efforts signal the PRC’s commitment to preserving the legitimacy of these institutions while simultaneously increasing its profile and voice within them.

Second, the PRC has also sought to attract support by creating loose coalitions of disaffected, non-aligned, or potentially sympathetic states, both to gain backing for its leadership and advance its policy agenda. This coalition-building effort operates on two levels: first, by working within existing institutions, and second, by creating auxiliary institutional structures that exclude the United States.

Within existing institutions, is has sought to depict itself as a champion of the developing world, creating a narrative which is echoed in fora like the United Nations. We can see this, for instance, in how it has portrayed itself as working in solidarity with the Group of 77, exemplified in its participation of the ministerial statement of “the Member States of the Group of 77 and China” on the sixtieth anniversary of the group proclaiming support for norms including “non-interference” and “self-determination.”[78] The PRC leverages this support to challenge how it is treated within these organisations. To wit, following the establishment of the South-South Human Rights Forum, the PRC secured support from over 80 countries in 2021 to sign the letter "The Majority of Countries Oppose

the Interference in China's Internal Affairs in the Name of Human Rights" in response to criticism of its human rights record at the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly.[79]

The PRC also builds loose coalitions to supplement existing international institutions by promoting a network of auxiliary organizations composed of states that are not the United States.[80] He refers to this as "exclusive institutional balancing".[81] These auxiliary institutions do not appear designed to replace existing frameworks but to augment them, bringing states together behind a state-focused, stability-focused, and development-focused agenda. They also offer the PRC additional fora for enhancing its status and fostering support for its political programme. Examples include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with its focus on regional security and economic integration in Central Asia,[82] and BRICS, which aims to enhance global infrastructure development and trade connectivity.[83]

Third, the PRC also employs international forms of patronage politics. In the context of international relations, such behaviour is often referred to as clientelism: an asymmetric but reciprocal exchange where larger states provide economic or strategic support to smaller states in return for political loyalty or favourable voting behaviour in international fora.[84] This is akin to patronage politics at the domestic level, where material resources are used to secure political loyalty.[85]

For the PRC, possibly the most prominent example of this is the massive amount of lending that has occurred under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the BRI has multiple motives and sources, both domestic and international,[86] it has led to numerous states benefiting from PRC loans. Through the BRI, it has become "the single largest official source of aid and credit to low-income and middle-income countries… now outspending the United States, the World Bank, and all other bilateral and multilateral sources of international development finance."[87] Although these arrangements do not necessarily make nations subservient to the PRC as "debt trap" discourses would suggest,[88] they do serve to encourage

deference and bolster support. While not the only reason for this funding, the PRC can nevertheless use it to effectively incentivize states that may not have been otherwise inclined to support it.

Patronage inducements do not always involve explicit loans or investment arrangements; they can also encompass broader economic statecraft strategies. These strategies economically incentivize countries through mechanisms such as market access, trade agreements, or even threats to withdraw such arrangements, similar to the dynamics of a domestic party machine that dispenses benefits to ensure ongoing loyalty from supporters. The PRC makes use of a variety of forms of economic statecraft to cultivate and sustain support within its international coalition.

Granted, states cannot become part of the PRC's political efforts in the same way individuals in a domestic context join an opposition party as members; and so the analogy has its limits. Nonetheless, like the domestic opposition, the PRC seeks to build support, establish credibility, and shift the policy agenda in its favour with the goal of undermining the incumbent. The opposition party tactics of working to increase presence and standing within global institutions, fostering coalitions through the creation of auxiliary institutions, and engaging in international patronage to win greater influence serve as important ways to pursue these ends.

Part 3: The PRC's International Campaigning Efforts & Political Communications

Akin to domestic opposition parties, the PRC also campaigns to broaden its base of support and reduce that of the incumbent, the United States. To do this, the PRC engages in political messaging not only to third-party governments but also their domestic publics. A broad array of terms can describe these efforts to influence foreign publics: "image-

making,"[89] "public diplomacy,"[90], and "influence operations,"[91] among others. These terms convey a broadly similar phenomenon—the PRC's objective to favourably enhance its global image and to garner support,[92] often grouped under the label of "soft power."[93] Through these efforts, the PRC pursues a reservoir of support that can be leveraged to enhance its position in multilateral institutions or at critical diplomatic junctures, as well as bolster support for its leadership. While much has been made of the PRC's soft power efforts,[94] in many ways these are another means to increase the PRC's favourability ratings as a candidate for global leadership.

To these ends, the PRC employs multiple tools and tactics, including cultural education programs, United Front activities, and media campaigns. Confucius Institutes, for instance, promote Chinese culture and foster positive perceptions of the PRC among foreign populations.[95] The United Front Work Department engages diaspora communities, cultivates networks of sympathetic politicians, and supports pro-PRC organizations to amplify favourable narratives in target countries.[96]

The PRC also operates a vast "digital public diplomacy" apparatus to shape public opinion through the digital sphere.[97] While these efforts include tactics such as paying online influencers,[98] and running targeted advertisements,[99] three are of primary importance. First, state-controlled media outlets, such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), The People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, and the Global Times, publish content in multiple languages on their websites and across prominent social media platforms; several of these have ranked among the top 50 most-liked accounts on Facebook.[100] Second, PRC diplomats, including embassy staff, ambassadors, and consuls, create accounts on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) among others to engage with international audiences.[101] Third, the PRC employs inauthentic social media accounts to amplify pro-PRC messaging on international social media

platforms . These accounts boost visibility and artificially enhance the popularity of specific narratives through coordinated campaigns. And the PRC has the highest volume of inauthentic accounts removed by platforms such as Twitter and Meta: between 2017 and 2021, Twitter detected and removed 31,151 core inauthentic accounts linked to the PRC, along with an additional 150,000 accounts used to amplify their content.[102]

The content promoted by the PRC online mirrors what would expect from a domestic opposition party .[103] It seeks two strategic aims, namely to boost its own reputation by promoting favourable narratives,[104] and to undermine the reputation of the US, the current global incumbent..[105]

The PRC pursues the first strategic aim—boosting its reputation—by promoting narratives that highlight its culture and governance capabilities. For instance, Xinhua, People's Daily, and CGTN are tasked with "help[ing] foreign people realize that the Chinese Communist Party is capable."[106] For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, PRC state-backed media highlighted the PRC's global leadership and benevolence in responding to and sharing supplies with European countries.[107] Alongside showcasing its achievements, the PRC also diverts international attention from negative narratives about its governance. For instance, to redirect criticism over its treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, PRC media outlets promoted Xinjiang as a premier tourist destination.[108]

As its second strategic aim, akin to smear campaigns by domestic opposition parties directed towards incumbents, the PRC seeks to undermine the reputation of the United States and the broader Western-led liberal order. For instance, apart from official diplomatic and state media messaging, the PRC uses inauthentic accounts to further this effort, such as via the "Spamouflage" network, which has accused the U.S. of fuelling international conflicts, including the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, for its own political and economic gain.[109] Meta has

removed over 7,700 Facebook accounts and nearly 1,000 pages linked to the Spamouflage network.[110]

Indeed, the PRC's digital public diplomacy campaigns repeatedly fluctuate between the two strategic aims—boosting its own reputation and undermining that of the U.S. For example, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, PRC state media initially portrayed itself as a neutral peacemaker. As international pressure on the PRC subsided, this narrative shifted to blaming the United States for prolonging the conflict.[111]

We are not arguing the PRC's efforts are necessarily successful. Of note, pro-PRC inauthentic social media accounts have struggled to attract genuine online engagement by real users,[112] and are frequently identified and removed by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Nonetheless, they are not entirely ineffective either. A survey conducted across 19 countries found exposure to PRC state media increased favourable views of the PRC's political model by 41%, its economic model by 30%, and its global leadership by 26%.[113] However, in many states baseline favourability toward the PRC still remains low.

What matters for our story, however, is that the PRC has chosen to invest heavily in these global campaigning tools. In doing so, it has adopted communications tactics that very much resemble those of domestic opposition parties—promoting positive news about its own policies and accomplishments while constantly painting the incumbent in a negative light.

CONCLUSION

The international system is not as it was. Today, the international environment incentivises a rising power such as the PRC not to follow the violent path of rising powers past but to pursue leadership by other means. Consequently, when it comes to the PRC's bid for a greater global leadership role, it has adopted a strategy of seeking followership and institutional position with certain analogical similarities to that of a domestic opposition party. This analogy suggests that the PRC will seek to do so by using tactics standard to

domestic political opposition parties. And this is what we observe, be it the PRC's manifesto, slogans and political programme for international consumption; its international institutional conduct, coalition building, or patronage behaviour; or its international political communications.

To be absolutely unambiguous on this point, we are not seeking to explain all aspects of the PRC's foreign policy and international behaviour. Desires for a larger international leadership role, increased status, and greater influence are not the only drivers of PRC foreign policy. The PRC also has its "core interests", and a different set of logics governs the PRC's approach to defending and advancing these. Here PRC responses, reactions, and strategies can be and are much more militant and militarised, and when it comes to core interests the PRC does not shy away from displaying a "dare to struggle" (敢于斗争) attitude. The drive for a greater leadership role and the drive to advance core interests may thus come into conflict. Correspondingly, an important question going forward is whether or not the strident and forceful PRC efforts to protect perceived core interests will detract from its attempts to present itself as a benevolent alternative global U.S. leadership, especially if a regional war erupts. Another potential impediment may also be backlash to opportunistic behaviour by PRC-affiliated actors seeking to gain international market share, maximise profit, or meet internal key performance indicators for the purposes of promotion or other reward. The PRC is not necessarily a monolith , and this can lead to actors working at cross-purposes.

A further issue is how PRC behaviour will continue to play out into the future, especially if we see a continued withdrawal on the part of the United States in terms of the provision of public goods, institutional participation, and the promotion of liberal values and forms of international order. Arguably, US behaviour may act to further validate the PRC's campaign and may even create expectations for PRC leadership that go beyond what the PRC is currently willing or able to shoulder. It is one thing to act as the opposition--criticising

from the sidelines and offering vague policy alternatives while aspiring for greater influence and status in the future--and quite another to suddenly be confronted with demands to shoulder the responsibilities and burdens of international leadership.

All the same, for the time being it does appear the PRC is continuing to develop a political programme and employing recognisable political tactics to build international support and increase its institutional status. These are not the tactics of previous of violent revisionist confrontation or active rebellion, they are those of global opposition party politics.

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