MAPPING CHINA'S GLOBAL FUTURE

PLAYING BALL OR ROCKING THE BOAT?

edited by **Axel Berkofsky** and **Giulia Sciorati**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**

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Introduction

It is almost a platitude to recall that China's international role has grown immensely over the past few decades. Beijing's stance on the world stage has expanded in economic, political, and military terms.

In 1990, the US economy was over 16 times larger than China's. Thirty years later it is just 1.5 times larger, and the gap is closing rapidly. In fact, at purchasing power parity, China had overtaken the US already seven years ago, in 2013. Sure, Beijing's "hard power" still lags behind, with a current defence budget that is about one third of the US's. But here, too, the rise has been spectacular, with China's defence budget growing nine-fold in just two decades.

China's foreign policy ambitions have skyrocketed as well, in particular since the start of Xi Jinping's term as the country's President in 2013. Within just a few years, Xi has informally shed Beijing's "peaceful rise" narrative – the official policy under his predecessor Hu Jintao (2004-2012). The message sent to the world through the "peaceful rise" narrative was crystal clear: despite the country's economic boom, Beijing would continue to act with self-restraint and moderation on the world stage. This message was clearly too "timid" for Xi's "China Dream", which implies a much more assertive stance both within the region (especially on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea) and on the global stage, with ambitious projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Xi also tried to buttress China's credentials as a defender of economic multilateralism. But the country's growing assertiveness is now for everyone to be seen.

However, questions abound on whether Beijing's global strategic outreach is sustainable, either in terms of material resources (economic and military) or in terms of potential reaction of allies and competitors to its rise. While past economic growth rates have been exceptional, the country cannot be expected to keep up with this trend for much longer. Indeed, recent evidence hints at the fact that China's growth is slowing (the IMF sees it at 6% in 2020, down from 11% in 2010). Problems that have been haunting Chinese policymakers for over a decade (but had been deftly postponed) are now in for a reckoning. It would suffice to mention the country's burgeoning debt, especially for households and corporations (and, in particular, banks and state-owned enterprises). Moreover, the Chinese economic malaise is under way while China is still far from having caught up with developed economies, at least in terms of income per capita. Indeed, Beijing still has a long way to go: currently, it ranks below the 60th place globally, and it can still be considered a middle-income economy.

The second hurdle China faces is how the others (allies and competitors) react to its rise, both within and beyond the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing's growing assertiveness has generated a backlash from its neighbours and regional partners. The construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea has scared some ASEAN countries, leading to public outcries over what they see as Beijing's encroachment on their sovereign rights. The Chinese government's vocal support for "Chinese unification" towards Taiwan has contributed to ward off the island's policymakers and put reconciliation on hold. And Beijing's efforts to exert increasing influence over Hong Kong has unleashed the most violent and pervasive protests in decades. Meanwhile, China's trade and industrial practices are being increasingly questioned not only by the US, but even by the European Union. Up until recently, Brussels had adopted a much softer stance; but in 2019 the EU started to screen foreign direct investment into the bloc to protect its strategic companies, and in the 2019 review of its global strategy, for the first time, the EU referred to China as a "systemic competitor".

This mixture of China's strengths and weaknesses is proof that there is a pressing need to explore some of the key aspects of Beijing's regional and global foreign and security policy. This is precisely what this Report sets about to do, as its authors attempt to analyse the core tenets that motivate and shape China's preferences and actions on the global stage, and their effects on its partners, allies, and rivals.

In the opening chapter, Kerry Brown examines the consequences and repercussions of Xi Jinping's so-called "China Dream". The Communist Party is the "custodian" of the China Dream, making sure that the "dream" as advertised by Xi is perceived as beneficial and a blessing for the Chinese people and does not turn into a "nightmare". As Brown puts it, China is not sufficiently prepared to assume global leadership, and has built its foreign and security strategy on shaky grounds.

In his chapter, Zhao Suisheng adds that Beijing's foreign and security policy agenda has assumed and maintains highly assertive tones. President Xi does not shy away from calling China a global power, which alarms some US policymakers and allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Put simply, in a marked turn of events, Chinese big power diplomacy is contributing to the kind of power politics that Beijing once opposed.

In this vein, Shin Kawashima sheds light on Xi's conceptualisation of a global international order. From China's perspective, the current international order is biased towards the US's preferences and favours US and Western interests. Beijing has now come to the point of formulating and proposing a number of alternatives to Western principles. At the same time, China does not completely oppose the UN or the principles of international law, instead endorsing or dismissing them as it suits its interests, in a pragmatic or – some might argue – exploitative fashion.

Political narratives are also at the heart of the chapter by Giulia Sciorati. The author analyses a new addition to the landscape of China's foreign policy documents: the "White Paper on National Defence", issued first in 2015 and then in 2019 by the State Council. The document targets an international audience, and is therefore a reliable indicator of how China wants to portray itself to the world. Sciorati underlines that the White paper is a direct response to the US "pivot to Asia" strategy, and that the 2019 editions contains many more references than the 2015 one both to "defence" (thus hinting at China's military preparedness and capacity to respond to threats) and to "development" (and therefore to China's ambition to project its "soft power" abroad).

The next three chapters investigate the practical implications of China's current stance in the world. First, Harsh V. Pant examines India-China geopolitical relations in South Asia in light of Beijing's increased regional assertiveness. The author stresses that, although China has acquired more "room for manoeuvre" on India's periphery, smaller states in South Asia have not yet openly aligned with either China or India. On the contrary, they have been relying on a strategy revolving around their own national interests, thus moving alternatively in the direction of one power or the other.

Chen Changwei and Nikola Stojanović put the spotlight on China's presence in yet another periphery – the EU's. The authors argue that China is on the frontline in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, due to economic interests that it shares with numerous countries in that region. The China-sponsored infrastructure projects in the 17+1 framework will continue to fuel tensions between the EU and the countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe that are receiving Chinese funds for infrastructural projects, and between the EU and China itself.

Finally, Axel Berkofsky argues that the EU and China have become "systemic competitors", at least by looking at official EU documents. When Brussels published the strategic communication "EU-China – A strategic outlook" in March 2019, policymakers in Beijing accused their counterparts in Brussels of joining forces with the US and Japan in seeking to contain China's economic and military rise. Berkofsky argues that Beijing's attempts to replace analysis with politicized comments depicted China as an alleged "victim" of US-driven containment and of Washington's policies to "keep China down".

However, the EU's concern on security issues are legitimate, and dialogue and a sober approach are sorely needed in order to tackle them. As China develops and becomes a global player, it should come as no surprise that experts, scholars and the wider public wonder what the country's future role on the world stage will be. Does China really have the capacity to project power and influence not only at the regional but also at the global level, as the BRI seems to suggest? Or, given its present and future material capabilities, is China bound to remain a regional power or a "partial (super) power", as David Shambaugh argued back in 2013? As this Report highlights, the answer to these questions will not only depend on China, but also – and, possibly, especially – on how other actors, at both the regional and global level, react to Beijing's impetuous rise.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President and Director

1. The China Dream: The Regional and Global Strategic Story

Kerry Brown

In part, the Xi era since 2012 has been one of what could be characterised as hybrid normalisation: China becoming like the rest of the developed world in some respects, while striving to maintain the uniqueness of its own model. In effect, it became normal with Chinese characteristics. At the heart of this complex idea was the objective of preserving the self-interest of the ruling party, the Communists. They have placed themselves in what is ostensibly an unmoveable and unchangeable part of the story of China's renaissance and its rise again to great nation status, delivering the "China Dream". The narratives of the Party State under Xi Jinping are that while all is geared towards achieving this modern dream of being a "strong powerful country" (*fuqiang guojia*), something that has been present since the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, there is a supplementary, subliminal story: without the unity, focus and strategic role of the Party, this great project will be in jeopardy. China stands in danger of reverting to the nightmare of a history of disunity, vulnerability and poverty which it experienced in the "century of humiliation" as it is called in domestic historiography from the mid-XIX century onwards. Under no circumstances, the Party promises, can that happen. Therefore the reverse side of the "China Dream" is the "China Nightmare". The Party is the custodian of both, ensuring one happens, and that the other never does.

The "China Dream" appeared in the discourse of the Party officially around late 2012[1]. Writers like the retired People's Liberation Army (PLA) general Liu Mingfu had written of the dream a few years before, in a controversial book that came out in Chinese in 2010 and spoke of a national quest for hegemony in the region, and a desire for China to be uncontested in its rise[2]. This followed from the earlier language in the Hu Jintao period of China's "Peaceful rise". Sponsored by the semi-official voice of Zheng Bijian from the Party School around 2005, the term had been criticised for its slightly ominous tone. Was the rise to a more assertive, more dominating entity what was being planned, critics asked? And what about the consent and role of parties around China, in particular Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea and other countries? Liu's language was more strenuous and overt in the declaration of its intentions than the more decorous diplomatic language of Zheng. China was rising, whether the world liked it or not. It had the economic assets now, and was fast acquiring the military ones to be able to increasingly get its own way in the region that mattered to it – that of Asia. The role of the world was either to accept this, or simply fight a losing battle and get overwhelmed by the tides of history.

Liu's was not a voice that was officially sanctioned by the government. But in an environment where censorship was de rigeur, the assumption was that the book would not have been publicly available without at least some level of consent from within the Party itself. Liu had to have had his patrons in order to issue something like this. Generals who still had some active

[1] One of the earliest references in the Xi era from November 2012, was a speech the new Party leader made to the exhibition in Beijing, "The Road to Rejuvenation", "Achieving Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People", given on 29 November the same year. See Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2014, p. 37 ss.

[2] This was eventually published in English as Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*, Beijing, CN Times Book, 2015.

role, such as Xiong Guangkai, also passed around the think tank summits of the world stating similarly muscular positions. And once more their comments were uttered in a context of ambiguity – who were they really speaking for? Themselves or some more significant cohort of leaders back in Beijing?

In the late 2000s, the immediate response by the rest of the world was nervousness followed by pushback. Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in 2009 famously declared that the Asia-Pacific was a priority strategic space for the US. The US was now a Pacific power[3]. Chinese commentators seethed over this language, with some wondering why it was that even in their own closest territory, they were not allowed the kind of licence that the US was near its own littoral borders. There was, however, a very sound reason for this, despite the shrillness of Chinese bloggers responding to Mrs Clinton's language, which can be summed up in one word: geography. The US, with only two shared borders with largely benign democracies, and vast sea space surrounding it, was largely untroubled in its own space. China had fourteen neighbours, most of which had experienced difficult and long histories with it, many of which did not share its political values, and some of which were treaty allies of the US. China's region was a heavily circumscribed and owned one, where a thick network of different relationships and allegiances criss-crossed the vast spaces of water between different countries. In many ways, the increasing problems of the South and East China Sea were simply proxies for this issue. China wanted to have more agency and control in the region around it, but was met by plenty of impediments, one of which was the US.

Thankfully, the route of simple military action was only spoken about in the more fanciful rhetoric of those with no power to enforce what they actually said, such as Xiong and Liu. For policymakers at state and military level in China, the simple reality was that for all the very considerable reforms and

[3] See Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011 (last retrieved on 13 July 2019).

investments made in its armaments and weapons, the US and its alliance system remained too far ahead to truly contest for many decades to come. The costs of a real military clash with the world's remaining superpower were too high. China had to consider a different, more patient route to gain what it wanted, which was a secure, uncontested place in its own region. With this in place it could focus on sorting out its domestic issues – issues that still meant that increasingly China was necessarily opening up to the world around it and therefore exporting its security risks. For the mindset of the Party leadership, this meant finding ways of imposing, by guile or consent, their own concept of stability and security beyond their borders, sometimes to partners they had no history of co-operation or even trust with. The one way to achieve this was the simple means of appeal to self-interest, with economic and material inducements at the forefront.

The "China Dream" was in domestic discourse a statement that, having achieved the primary stage of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the country was now able to deliver to its people a level of living that was equal to that of middle income countries. But it was also about selling the dynamic vision of a future where, with the centenary goals of 2021 and 2049 mapping out the future, Chinese would soon be able to live like Americans, and Europeans[4]. To do this, they needed to maintain good quality growth (so not large GDP increases, but ones which resulted in a more service-oriented, sustainable economy) in order to deliver materially for people, but also to achieve something more abstract and challenging – status for Chinese people globally. China needed to be restored to its place as a great entity, something that official narratives made clear was what had been the case in the imperial past[5]. The

[4] The two centenary goals are to mark the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 1921 and of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

[5] For how this works, see K. Brown, *China's Dream: The Culture of the Communist Party and the Secret Sources of its Power*, Cambridge, Polity, 2018.

"China Dream" was partly connected to a golden era, the periods of time when China under its various imperial dynasties was regarded as a great civilisation (at least by itself), and one with deep and rich intellectual, cultural and spiritual resources. The irony of the Communist Party, who under Mao had castigated this dynastic history as one primarily about exploitation, feudalism and inequality now starting to embrace it and mine it for political resources was poignant. But for Xi and his colleagues, it was a natural space to seek legitimacy when Marxism Leninism as an ideology clearly had little if any traction for the vast majority of people outside the Party elite itself. For all its dynamism and forward-looking tone, the "China Dream", linked so closely to the language of national renaissance (*fuxing guojia*), is also tinged with nostalgia. Before the 45th President of the United States came to power in 2017, the People's Republic was on a track to "make China great again".

The elision of domestic and international in the "China Dream" is therefore significant. The partition of internal and external policy language in China has been one of the consistent features of politics in the People's Republic in the years since 1949. There was the world, and there was China, with a mental Great Wall dividing them. This came to exist even in the supposedly global common good of the Internet and cyberspace, where China's "Great Firewall" ensured that there was no easy link between the two spaces. There was China's Internet, and that of the outside world. This was even figured in a more ideological language with Xi's talk of internet sovereignty.

The very act in the "China Dream" and its associated discourse of coupling internal and external in this way meant, by logical implication, that in the areas closest to it physically one gets under Xi Jinping this new phenomenon of international space with Chinese characteristics and increasing attempts by China for international influence. Part of this has been a product of necessity. As China sought to change its economic model to a more sophisticated, less manufacturing-based, more innovative one, it needed to have different, more specific relations with partners across the world. It was no longer in the simple business of importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods, engaging in transactions that were predominantly physical. It was involving itself in rising levels of finance flows, some involving the RMB which was slowly internationalising, and larger and more diverse amounts of outward investment. Much of this was in geographies, and in resource sectors, which were high risk. The Communist Party, as the risk management entity par excellence, needed to somehow do all it could in environments where it lacked the main tools of control it enjoyed domestically to preserve itself from harm and financial or asset loss. To compound matters, it had to do this with the great impediment of having a political model and a mode of talking to the world which was often regarded as alien, and even more often misunderstood and mistrusted.

But beyond necessity there was also the simple fact of China under Xi being married to official narratives that involved status. China was, in Xi's response to President Obama in Sunnylands, California when they met in 2013, a Pacific power. Since 2010 it had become the world's second largest economy, overtaking Japan. It was therefore also a global power. It wanted, and felt it merited, strategic space around it, and some more voice in its own region. From this time, therefore, the New Silk Road started to figure, quickly transforming into the One Belt, One Road, and then in 2015 the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Alongside this, entities initiated by China like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) also appeared. All were contested by the US, but embraced by many others. All were focussed on crafting a more sympathetic, positive international space for China, and all were initially strongly committed to the Asian region. They also flowed from the demand that Xi himself had made when coming to power in 2012 to 2013 to "tell the China story". The "China Dream" was the domestic story. But it had to have a more outward facing aspect, for the reasons spelled out above – economic necessity and status. It is in this nexus that the message towards the aspirations of the Chinese people made by the Party under Xi are linked with the world around. The "China Dream", the argument seems to go, is also one that is good for the world, bringing opportunities for material enrichment, and a different kind of stability than that of the US and its hegemony which had been in existence till now. China was not in the business of military opportunism, but wanted to present a different kind of geopolitics, based on economic growth, and more diversity. These were the positives, at least.

If the "China Dream" is the domestic aspect of the current holistic global vision of Xi's People's Republic, then the BRI is its outward face. The softer side of this is to operate firstly as a means through which China can learn to engage more with the wider world, and the outside world can find ways of working better with China, sometimes by simply adopting some parts of what has been called the "China Model". This phrase, once deployed by scholars outside China, is now one that Xi himself used in his epic speech at the 19th Party Congress October 2017. The BRI offers a binding narrative, whereby China states, as cogently as it can, the centrality of its growth potential for countries around it. The surface of this is the "win-win" language which often figures on government propaganda. Beneath this is a hardnosed appeal to self-interest. The Chinese party state is saying that it controls access to the greatest potential economic asset in the world – the spending and consumption potential of the emerging, urbanised, middle class working in the service sector within the country. This group currently amounts to 300 million. It may well rise to double this in the next decade. The ability of this "bourgeoisie with Chinese characteristics" to figure increasingly in global trade and use of services is largely unquestioned by economists inside and outside China. In some ways, the BRI flaunts (subliminally rather than overtly) the access and use of this group for not just domestic but global growth. But it is also clear that getting closer to this group carries with it costs – costs which are levied both by the Chinese government, but also that arise from the complex relationship between the government and this middle class.

There is a simple reason for this. While the contemporary emerging Chinese middle class, the group most targeted by the notion of a "dream", whose aspirations are so key to Xi and the fulfilment of his grand programme to make China a great powerful nation again, are emotionally open to and find the nationalism of his administration appealing, the Party state looking to exploit this kind of nationalism is also a double edged sword. The outside world, still key to China's growth plans and policies and from which stability and at least some kinds of collaboration are needed, not least in validating the country's renaissance and its global status, has limited experience of what nationalism with "Chinese characteristics" means. What it has seen, in the form of fierce protests about the South and East China Seas, and against Japan during rocky periods in their relationship a decade ago, troubles it. For the Xi leadership, the social contract that has emerged in the last few years has drifted from simply promising to deliver better material living standards and pumping out daily GDP rises to a more complex one, where, as this growth inevitably slows down (nowhere can maintain double digit growth perpetually) new sources of legitimacy are sought. Nationalism fills this space, and lies at the heart of some of the most persistent and powerful new themes of Chinese party state messaging. This has intensified particularly in the period after summer 2018 when the US started to increase its pressure and move towards a trade war. Chinese people were told to get ready for another long march. Xi himself visited some of the hallowed spaces of Communist sacrifice and suffering during its period coming to power[6]. These made it clear that Chinese nationalism is likely to become purer, more potent, and more dangerous. Xi's government has to deliver on its promises to ensure that the country is powerful and great and that, across the region, no

[6] See the report of Xi's visit with his chief economic advisor Vice Premier Liu He to Yadu, the place where the Long March started in the 1930s, Zhou Xin, Wendy Wu and Kinling Lo, "Chinese President Xi Jinping sounds Long March rallying call as US trade war tensions rise", *South China Post*, 20 May 2019 (last retrieved on 13 July 2019).

one is seen as undermining or challenging it. Even for a democracy speaking to like-minded countries around it, this is a tough message to deliver. For China, isolated by its unique political model, the sell is even harder. Even under the softest language of economic appeal and mutual benefit, reinforced by the commitments to non-interference in the affairs of others, there always lurk claims that the PRC is simply buying or blackmailing others to do things that end up being finally in its own interests.

The perceptions of China's ambitions and its role in the region therefore are not straightforward. They focus on the ways in which what it does and what it says are heavily circumscribed by a common apprehension of what it really wants – to be dominant and exist at least in its own neighbourhood as the number one. It does not want to do this primarily by the expensive outlay on military and hard power, but through a subtle network of trade, technology and other kinds of commitments, which at the very least make outside partners careful, or sometimes simply curtail, their more critical instincts about China. Debt, it is claimed, has been saddled on some countries. On others, fierce diplomacy has made it clear of the costs of crossing China (witness the behaviour at the Pacific Islands forum in 2018). Other modes of influence are less overt – use of more sympathetic local networks, many of them consisting of the Chinese diaspora, in places from Malaysia, to Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore. Sometimes this backfires, as it did when a New Zealand MP Jian Yang figured negatively because of claimed links to his native China during the 2017 national election[7]. More often than not it has resulted in an environment in which one of China's key aims in the BRI – to be better and more sympathetically understood – has turned into media claims that through business, Confucius Centres[8], and other means, China is trying to enforce a view of it from the outside world which is uncritical and benign – and complacently naïve.

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[7] See T. Philips, "China Born New Zealand MP Denies Being a Spy", *The Guardian*, 13 September 2017 (last retrieved on 13 July 2019).

[8] Funded by the Chinese government.

Chinese leaders may have objective reasons for complaining about much of this coverage. Their strongest arguments are that just in keeping a fifth of humanity in increasingly decent living standards, in eradicating poverty (which the Xi government looks set to do within the next few years) and contributing so much to overall global growth, particularly since the great economic crisis of 2008, they have been a largely positive force in the world. The more adventurous amongst them might also spell out exactly what an unstable, fragmenting China might mean to the region and world around it. Compared to these dystopian scenarios, even if China is engaged in propaganda wars, these are largely small beer compared to what might be alternatives. But that does not detract from the amount of anxiety that China's prominence and perceived new assertiveness has given rise to in 2019. The question is whether the dynamics of its domestic politics as described above, with the aspirations of a middle class more important, and nationalism as a principle mode of emotional mobilisation by the Party state, is in fact a real security and strategic threat, or something less worrisome.

While it is clear that China is keen for more sympathetic views towards it from the wider world, and has put significant resources into this in terms of media, soft power support, etc., what is far less clear is whether this poses a threat, and if so what kind of threat that might be. There are claims about China's designs and ambitions aplenty. But in terms of actions, if the evidence were clear, then there would be more consensus than there is in the region and further afield about whether China is indeed a threat. One thing is certain: China is an exclusive and excluding power. When it talks of exporting the above-mentioned "China model", this is largely a set of economic practices that often work more in ways that China likes rather than aim to create duplicate China polities around it. China has shifted from the Maoist era in trying, with very mixed success, to proselytise and export Maoist governance models, to now ironically regarding its unique experiment in what one scholar called Confucian Leninism as in fact central to its identify, and something relevant only for itself[9]. It is not in the business of selling Sinified-Marxism, or Socialism with Chinese characteristics to the outside world for the simple reason that to be able to embrace these one has to be Chinese – and arguably only China can do that!

What China clearly wants is a world order that works for it, and one where it is able to enjoy benefits without making politically and economically costly security commitments to others. Its creed is a self-interested one. It seeks therefore to work in ways which can be interpreted as geared towards common destiny, but which are primarily in its own interests with the assumption that others will have the same mindset and that this will therefore be a just and workable international arrangement. The message it is now selling is that what is in China's interests is by definition also in the interests of the rest of the world. That interpretation of win-win, not often clearly spelt out, is what guides the Belt and Road and almost every other diplomatic endeavour that China engages with. If this is interpretation is right, China operates as a threat not for offensive or malign intent, but through selfishness. It wants a world that works for it – something that a lot of the time might well be fine for others too, but which, not infrequently, simply does not suit them. At these times, arguments and issues with China become all too real.

Accommodating China's self-interested worldview in ways that work for those trying to do this is likely to become one of the great challenges of the next decade or so. China's unique political model, its indigenisation of capitalism, and the ways in which it now exists as a huge, but entirely *sui generis* actor, mixing western and Chinese intellectual traditions and producing something hybrid and hard to categorise (except by the constant deployment of the unhelpful words "with Chinese characteristics" attached to them) means that while a unipolar world

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[9] See L. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures*, Michigan, Ann Arbor, Center for China Studies, 1988, p. 38.

centred on the US may be slowly coming to an end, it is not so much multipolarity that will replace this, but a bipolar order. In this bipolar world China's security threat will not be an overt one – except over issues like Taiwan and the South and East China Seas which directly matter to it. It will not be seeking security commitments unless they absolutely relate to its interests, and it is more often likely to engage with these in partnership with others to share the risk. There is every likelihood that with this kind of mindset, it will be China's unwillingness to engage in matters it does not define as of central security importance to it, rather than actively getting involved, which will be the issue. China may well have the capacity, and in some areas it might be granted this sort of role by the wider world – but it is unlikely to have the will. The "China Dream" after all is one that appeals to people's sense of their own wellbeing, and the satisfaction of their own aspirations and desires. It is not one easily translated into a more altruistic language. Ironically, it is not China's desire to mould and take over the world around it that will prove challenging in the bipolar age we are moving into, but its resistance to any role that does not place satisfaction of its own need directly at its centre. The greatest threat is not China's ambitions, but its selfishness, and this will define the coming decades.