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## **The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas**

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## 1 Introduction

The Chinese government refers to the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a “Near-Arctic State” (近北极国家). Appearing in almost all official statements describing China's role in the Arctic, the term reflects the Chinese government's ambitions to be recognized as a key player in this realm, even though the country is not geographically adjacent to the Arctic.<sup>1</sup> The term's genesis is a prime example of a Chinese scholar's influence on the official construction of China's national interest. According to Lu Junyuan<sup>2</sup> (2010), Zhang Xia, a researcher at the Polar Research Institute of China (中国极地研究中心),<sup>3</sup> first used the term “Near-Arctic State” in the early 2000s (2010, 339). Kossa (2020) and Wu Fuzuo (2022) show that the term first spread in Chinese academic circles and was then picked up by government officials (Kossa 2020; Fuzuo Wu 2022). In 2018, the Chinese government included the concept in a white paper outlining its Arctic policy. It claimed that “[g]eographically, China is a “Near-Arctic State”, one of the continental states that are closest to the Arctic Circle” (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2018b).

### 1.1 Puzzle and research question

Against the backdrop of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s top-down rule, Chinese scholars' and other societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest appears puzzling. Having centralized political power even more than his predecessors, CCP General Secretary and PRC State President Xi Jinping conveys the impression that he alone determines China's foreign policy. This suggests that there is no room for domestic actors, let alone societal

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<sup>1</sup> The shortest distance between the Arctic and Chinese territory is roughly 1500 kilometers (Fuzuo Wu 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Since many Chinese scholars I cite share the same surnames, I decided to include the full names of all Chinese scholars I mention.

<sup>3</sup> According to its website, the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) focuses on scientific research and logistic support for polar expeditions, through conducting research in this field and operating research stations. It was founded in 1989. As a think tank, it is supposed to provide advice for foreign policy decision-making related to the Polar Regions. Link to Website: <https://www.cnarc.info/members/21-polar-research-institute-of-china> [last accessed 18 January 2023, 9:15].

actors, to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Yet, theoretical approaches in International Relations (IR) focusing on the role of political leaders in foreign policy-making cannot account for changes in the official construction of China's national interest under Xi's rule. This might be because societal actors, especially experts, who continue to voice their expectations about China's foreign policy even in a highly centralized authoritarian regime like PRC, have at least some influence over how China's national interest is constructed. As a global power, the PRC is internationally engaged in various fields. Borrowing a key argument from the International Political Economy literature on domestic preferences and trade (Lake, 2009, p. 225), I expect that the more expansive China's international engagement becomes, the more societal actors develop diverging and potentially conflicting expectations about China's foreign policy. Thus, despite severe limits on their freedom of expression, societal actors, including experts, lobbyists, and members of the broader civil society, make their voices heard and try to influence the official construction of China's national interest. So far, researchers have identified societal actors capable of influencing China's foreign policy. Some have even worked out through which channels these actors can exert influence (Abb 2015; H. Feng, He, and Yan 2019). However, despite excellent work on foreign policy-making processes in China, we do not yet know when and how much Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap.

In this dissertation, I examine under what conditions societal actors influence the official constructions of the national interest in authoritarian states. In particular, I assess under what conditions Chinese scholars and think-tank experts influence the official construction of China's national interest. I focus on these two groups of societal actors because the existing literature on Chinese societal actors' influence on foreign policy suggests that out of all Chinese societal actors, foreign policy experts are most likely to influence the official construction of China's national interest (for details, see Chapter 2). Due to important differences between both groups, their influence on the official construction of China's national interest should be analyzed separately.

The most important difference between the two groups is that scholars put research before policy advice, while think-tank analysts prioritize offering advice to the government. In addition, the state might relate differently to scholars and think-tank experts.

In an authoritarian context like the PRC, societal actors are not independent of the state. Authoritarian rulers set clear limits on what societal actors can do and say. At the same time, the rulers are dependent on societal actors' input and therefore need to provide them with some leeway. Societal actors depend on the space authoritarian rulers provide them with but can also adopt different strategies for working with authoritarian governments. A concrete example is that societal actors reiterate political concepts put forward by the government to get their points across (Hildebrandt 2013). How distant or close societal actors are from the state is ultimately an empirical question that depends on formal ties to and interactions with party-state institutions.

I examine changes in the official construction of China's national interest after Xi Jinping took power in 2012/2013.<sup>4</sup> This leadership transition is widely seen as a "watershed moment" in Chinese politics: "marked by a political scandal", (...) [it] appeared "nasty and brutish", involving high-level struggle and instability, it initiated a new phase of Chinese politics" (Jaros and Pan 2018, 120). The transition almost brought down the CCP's rule. However, Xi Jinping managed to stabilize the party's rule and established himself as a leader with a strong hand. Many scholars agree that this has important implications for foreign policy: Since Xi Jinping took power, China's foreign policy has become more proactive (J. Zhang 2015) or even assertive (Chang-Liao 2018; Poh and Li 2017; J. Wang 2019). While such changes already surfaced under the previous administration (Doshi 2019), the changes became far more visible under Xi. Today nobody can know when (or how) Xi Jinping will leave office, which makes a complete examination of changes in the official construction of China's national interest during his rule impossible at this point. The time frame

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<sup>4</sup> Since leadership generations play such an important role, it would be interesting to compare the current administration with the last and assess how foreign policy frames differ under Hu and Xi. There is, however, one practical and one conceptual concern linked to this exercise: First, I am not sure whether it would be feasible to conduct a detailed mapping of foreign policy frames over 15 years. Second, while foreign policy documents are easily available for the past 15 years, obtaining input from societal actors is more difficult, the data trail is likely to fade out. The problem then is that I will not be able to compare the role of societal actors' under the two administrations.

of the analysis in this dissertation ends in 2019, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, and its at the time of writing, still unfolding geopolitical consequences hit. Hence, the dissertation covers the first six years of Xi Jinping's tenure as CCP General Secretary and PRC State President. While the systematic examination of official foreign policy statements and societal actors' foreign policy debates ends in 2019, I contextualize the findings with ongoing changes in China's domestic structures beyond this time frame.

This chapter first details what makes this research project relevant, then demonstrates how it differs from prevailing understandings of what shapes the official construction of China's national interest. After presenting the dissertation's theoretical argument, the chapter outlines the analytical challenges to be overcome to apply it to the Chinese context and introduces the data and methods used in this dissertation.

## **1.2 Relevance**

Under authoritarian rule, state-society relations are intricate, which has important consequences for the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes. Contrary to popular perceptions, societal actors exist and engage in foreign policy debate even under highly centralized authoritarian rule. In contrast to democratic settings, societal actors are not autonomous from the state in authoritarian regimes. Instead, links between the state and societal actors are multifaceted, formed through formal institutional ties and more informal interactions. The existence of societal debate and the multifaceted links between state and society influence the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes alongside international factors and interactions between state actors at the domestic level. How exactly societal influence affects the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes is an empirical question that needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis. Given the high degree of centralization of political power and the restrictions on research in the Chinese context, the PRC is a hard case for examining societal actors' influence on foreign policy.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012/2013, China's foreign policy has changed in important ways, but explanations that center on the role of the state derived from statist approaches fail to account for these changes. Smith (2021), for instance, examining the concept of "major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色大国外交), shows how changes in China's foreign policy discourse dramatically expanded "the boundaries of legitimate state action" (Smith 2021, 1). However, it has yet to be recognized that at different points in time during Xi's tenure, different elements relating to China's national interest, ranging from defending China's territory and citizens from external threats over expanding its external economic relations and promoting its values to its role in international and regional politics, dominated China's official foreign policy statements. Apart from that, there were subtle shifts in policy substance across various issues related to China's national interest. While much research examines how Xi Jinping's foreign policy differs from his predecessors (Hu 2019; Z. Lin 2019; F. Zhang 2016, 2019b; Yongjin Zhang 2016), changes in how China's national interest has been constructed under him have yet to be examined and explained.

Shifts in the official construction of the national interest matter because language plays a crucial role in international politics. Instead of dismissing official discourse as propaganda, one should consider it because it offers important clues about the Chinese leadership's intentions and ambitions (Poh and Li 2017, 86). According to Mattis (2019), "too often Beijing's intentions are assumed or deduced theoretically without reference to anything the CCP has said", even though there are documents, most importantly, the reports to the party congress, which could help understand Beijing's intentions and objectives (Mattis 2019). More broadly, language matters in foreign policy because "diplomacy places a premium on storytelling" (Robertson 2017, 29). Krebs (2015) further explains that language "neither competes with nor complements power politics: it is power politics" (2015, 2). In the context of this project, expressing a country's national interest matters for three reasons: 1) it signals intent, resolve, and capabilities to external audiences, 2) it binds governments, and 3) it predates policy behavior. The expression of a state's national interest

matters because it signals intent, resolve, and capabilities to external audiences. Only looking at the PRC as a sender of signals, in this dissertation, I understand the expression of China's national interest through foreign policy frames in official statements as a prerequisite of signaling. The concept of "peaceful rise" (和平崛起), introduced by Zheng Bijian, former executive vice president of the Central Committee's Central Party School, in 2006, was meant to assure an international audience that China was not a threat (Glaser and Medeiros 2007, 291). This example illustrates how China signaled intent ("peaceful") as well as resolve ("rise"). The argument of rhetorical commitment poses that once a government has put forward its national interests, it is bound by them. It works best in highly institutionalized contexts such as the European Union, where member states develop norms together and clear processes of holding each other accountable (Thomas 2009). While China is not part of such an institutionalized structure, the Chinese government sometimes makes public pledges that other actors refer to. For example, at multilateral meetings, Chinese government representatives frequently pledge that China will uphold free trade principles. Xi Jinping's speech at the World Economic Forum in 2017 is a prime example of such a public pledge (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017a). Since then, other governments referred to Xi's speech when they called for reciprocity and equal access to the Chinese market for foreign companies trying to hold the Chinese government accountable for its public pledge. Expressing a state's national interest can predate foreign policy action because its foreign policy should be guided by national interest. Although predictions are difficult, carefully examining how a state expresses its national interest can hint at how the state will behave in the future. An example from China's foreign policy is the emergence of safeguarding "maritime rights and interests" (海洋权益). The emergence of the term, which implied that China no longer sees itself as a land-based power, but extends its reach into the maritime realm, predates China's more aggressive stance in the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea.

This dissertation challenges two conventional views of IR. It defies the notion that foreign policy rhetoric is unworthy of analysis by paying close attention to changes in the official

construction of China's national interest under Xi Jinping. For some IR scholars, expressing a state's national interest is merely discursive and has no repercussions in the material world. Realist IR scholars, in particular, discount communication as mere "cheap talk" and argue that communication only carries diplomatic signals, which are often unreliable, from one state to another (Mitchell 2011). However, the preceding section demonstrated that signaling intent, resolve, and capabilities, binding governments, and predating policy behavior are key reasons why it matters how a country expresses its national interest. By engaging with the idea that despite the shrinking space for societal debate and societal input to China's foreign policy, societal actors might still influence China's foreign policy, this dissertation challenges another conventional view in IR scholarship, that is, the claim that societal actors cannot influence the foreign policy of an authoritarian regime. For example, it is fairly common to describe China's foreign policy without even trying to peek into the black box of its authoritarian regime (Chang-Liao 2018; Friedberg 2018).

### **1.3 Prevailing understandings**

Researchers spend much effort ascertaining what China's national interest entails. While some acknowledge the possibilities of change, a systematic assessment of how the expression of China's national interest changed under Xi Jinping is still lacking. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese scholars have proposed different conceptions of China's national interest. The recent shift to a more proactive foreign policy brought discussions about China's national interest to the forefront of debates about China's foreign policy. Existing scholarship offers ample accounts of what China's national interest could be. Some scholars acknowledge that China's national interest can change and has indeed changed in recent years. However, so far, it has not yet systematically been traced how China's national interest has changed. This is because the existing literature largely conceives China's national interest as static. As a result, existing accounts of China's national interest also miss how domestic actors construct China's national interest.

The literature describes Xi Jinping as having centralized political power even more than his predecessors (Lee 2017). For foreign-policy making, discussed implications of this top-down rule include that the General Secretary himself increased his control over foreign policy, for instance, through coordinating agencies, such as the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and the Central National Security Commission, all chaired by Xi Jinping (Cabestan 2021). In addition, Central Work Conferences are an important tool for top-level design. The fact that Xi Jinping has already convened three such conferences on international issues signals that he wants to play a more direct role in foreign policy-making (K. Zhao and Gao 2016). Regarding institutions, upgrading the leading small group for foreign affairs into a commission that continues to be chaired by Xi Jinping is the most important example of the centralization of political power in foreign policy-making (Cabestan 2021).

Statist approaches to explaining changes in the official construction of China's national interest center around leaders' beliefs, ideological factors, bureaucratic actors, and geopolitics. Under highly centralized authoritarian rule, leaders can have an outsized impact on the official construction of their country's national interest, as has been demonstrated by recent scholarship on Xi's impact on the transformation of China's foreign policy (Hu 2019; Rudd 2022; F. Zhang 2016). Theoretical approaches focusing on ideological factors emphasize the increased importance that the CCP attaches to ideology and how this affects China's foreign policy rhetoric (K. G. Cai 2020; Cha 2017; Mayer 2018; W. Song 2020). The bureaucratic politics approach focuses on the foreign policy process and tries to explain how foreign policy decisions are made. It helps scholars not to treat China as a monolithic actor as it draws attention to different domestic actors involved (Lai and Kang 2014). Scholars focusing on geopolitics argue that maximizing security and power vis-à-vis other states is the most important foreign policy goal and should, therefore, dominate the official construction of China's national interest (K. G. Cai 2020; Xiaoting Li 2016).

In the existing literature, public opinion, NGOs, business interests, and experts appear as societal actors that could influence China's foreign policy. In the Chinese context, public opinion

about foreign policy issues is commonly examined through nationalist protests and public opinion surveys (Bell and Quek 2018; Weiss 2013, 2014, 2019). While it has been well established that public opinion plays at least some role in shaping China's foreign policy, the specific mechanisms are still largely unknown. The literature on how Chinese NGOs shape China's foreign policy reveals interesting insights into their influence on foreign policy in specific instances in narrowly defined issue areas (Gamso 2019; Su 2010). Similarly, business interests' influence is concentrated on specific policy fields or individual policies (Ghiselli 2021; Gong 2018). Of all the societal actors discussed, scholars and think tank analysts are the most likely group to influence China's foreign policy (Abb 2015; H. Feng, He, and Yan 2019; Glaser and Medeiros 2007; Hua 2017).

Existing scholarship offers varying interpretations of China's national interest. A systematic examination of how China's national interest changed under Xi Jinping is still lacking. Since existing accounts do not conceive of China's national interest as constructed, they miss how domestic actors can influence it even under top-down rule. While scholars and think tank experts emerge as the most likely group of societal actors to influence the official construction of China's national interest, under what conditions they can do so remains to be examined.

#### **1.4 Argument**

This study aims to explain the construction of China's national interest (dependent variable). The main argument is that it is shaped by societal constructions of the national interest (independent variable). The empirical analysis in the dissertation reveals that there is no perfect match between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest. Hence, there is no perfect transmission belt between societal ideas and the official construction of China's national interest. As a result, the dissertation's explanatory focus is on two domestic structural variables that condition the relationship between the official construction of the national interest and societal constructions of the national interest: namely, societal actors' proximity to the state, and the state's openness to societal input. How close a societal actor is to the state depends on the extent and

quality of formal ties and interactions with state institutions. How open the state is to societal input is conditioned by domestic structures that are determined by characteristics of the state and society, as well as links between state and society. Domestic structures change over time.

In this dissertation, I argue that various constellations of these two variables facilitate or constrain societal influence on the official construction of the national interest. When societal actors are close to the state, and the state is open to societal input, societal actors have the most influence on the official construction of the national interest. When societal actors are distant from the state and the state is not open to societal input, societal actors have the least influence on the official construction of the national interest. Finally, when societal actors are close to the state and when the state is not open to societal input, and when societal actors are distant from the state and the state is open to societal input, societal actors can somewhat influence the official construction of the national interest.

Domestic structures describe the nature of political institutions (“the state”), society’s basic features, and the institutional and organizational arrangements that link the state and society and form the foundation for channeling societal demands into the political system (Risse-Kappen 1991, 484). The nature of political institutions mainly manifests itself in the degree of centralization of the political system, that is, how concentrated executive power is. Society’s basic features relate to polarization, the strength of social organization, and the degree to which societal pressure can be mobilized. Lastly, links between the state and society can be either dominated by the state or society (ibid, p. 486).

Understanding how the national interest is constructed is difficult, especially in authoritarian regimes where (foreign) policy-making is often veiled in secrecy (Barros 2016). The dissertation’s methodological innovation lies in combining a frequentist understanding of causal inference with carefully considering the context in which societal actors influence the official construction of China’s national interest. Through assessing the fit between the official and societal constructions of China’s national interest, this dissertation shows that there is no perfect

transmission belt between societal ideas and the official construction of China's national interest. The quantitative assessment of the effect of the two intervening structural variables is bolstered with an in-depth analysis of the instances in which societal actors influenced the official construction of China's national interest. Empirically, this dissertation shows that Chinese societal actors still influence the official construction of China's national interest despite the increasing centralization of political power. These insights allow us to reexamine societal actors' influence on China's foreign policy and its involvement in international politics.

## **1.5 Data and methods**

To apply the theoretical argument outlined above to the Chinese context, five analytical challenges need to be overcome: how to map changes in the official construction of China's national interest, how to identify societal constructions of China's national interest, how to assess the fit between official and societal constructions of national interest, how to measure societal actors' proximity to the state and how to assess the state's openness to societal input. In this section, I show how frame analysis and quantitative content analysis were employed to address these challenges.

The Chinese government conveys the official construction of China's national interest through official foreign policy statements. To map changes in the official construction of China's national interest, I adapt frame analysis to study Chinese policy documents and analyze close to 100 documents. Frame analysis describes the systematic identification and examination of frames (see, for example Goffman 1974). A frame is a schema of interpretation that performs at least one of the following four functions: problem description, diagnosis of causes, moral interpretation, and suggestion of remedies (Entman 1993). After identifying frames in the material, I analyze them quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative assessment, I cluster all identified frames into themes that relate to the different components of the official construction of China's national interest (see Chapter 3 for details). Then, I examine changes in the relative salience of these components. For the qualitative assessment, I examine how frames that appear at different points

in time differ, allowing me to trace incremental changes in the policy substance related to the official construction of China's national interest.

I consider academic articles and reports published by scholars and think-tank analysts as contributions to foreign policy debates to identify societal constructions of China's national interest. From the different strands of quantitative content analysis methods, dictionary methods are most suitable for this project. My analysis encompasses two steps: First, I ascertain how prominently the constructions of national interest identified in the official foreign policy statements feature in experts' contributions. For this, I examine how frequent the keywords defined in the frame analysis are in experts' contributions. This quantitative analysis provides a general impression of how aligned foreign policy debates and the official construction of the national interest are in China. Second, I trace the shifts in policy substance identified in official foreign policy statements in societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates. I analyze around 500 policy reports and 2000 journal articles.

I must also assess the fit between official and societal constructions of China's national interest. This entails examining thematic overlaps, scrutinizing the temporal sequencing of policy shifts that appear both in official foreign policy statements and societal actors' contributions, and an in-depth examination of said policy shifts. Only if there are substantial overlaps between official and societal constructions of the national interest and only if policy shifts first appear in societal contributions and then in official foreign policy statements can societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest.

Many Chinese think tank experts and scholars contribute to Chinese foreign policy debates. I must carefully consider which institutions and individuals to include to avoid selection bias. Rather than simply choosing individuals from institutions commonly claimed to be influential, I develop a measurement that allows me to rank think-tankers and scholars based on their proximity to the state. For developing the measurement, I draw on the literature on Chinese experts' roles in China's political system and foreign policy-making.

Measuring the state's openness to societal input, the second intervening variable that conditions societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest, poses the fifth analytical challenge this project needs to overcome. Applying the political opportunity structures concept introduced in Chapter 3 allows us to identify three areas to consider for measuring the state's openness to societal input: rules and norms, resources, and the broader political environment.

## **1.6 Plan of the study**

The dissertation's chapters 2–4 show how the existing literature can be invoked to determine under what conditions Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest. Reviewing prevailing understandings of changes in the official construction of China's national interest, conceptualizing and operationalizing the components of the theoretical argument provides the foundation for the study's original analyses. Chapters 5–7 then present the study's original findings on the conditions under which Chinese scholars and think tank analysts influence the official construction of China's national interest.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that current understandings of China's national interest cannot fully explain changes in the official construction of China's national interest under Xi Jinping. Since they do not conceive of China's national interest as constructed, they cannot fully capture changes in the official construction of China's national interest and fail to adequately capture the influence of societal actors.

Chapter 3 presents the study's theoretical argument. Drawing on the existing literature, it defines and conceptualizes the dissertation's dependent variable, the official construction of the national interest, its independent variable, societal constructions of the national interest, as well as the structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest, societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input.

Chapter 4 describes the five analytical challenges that must be tackled to find out under what conditions Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest, that is, how to map changes in the official construction of China's national interest, how to identify societal constructions of the national interest, how to assess the fit between the official and societal constructions of the national interest, how to measure societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input. In addition, it discusses potential problems with causal identification in this research and how to mitigate them.

Moving on to the presentation of the study's empirical results, Chapter 5 demonstrates that there is no perfect match between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest by detailing overlaps and differences in the relative salience of the components of the construction of the national interest and policy substance across official foreign policy documents and societal contributions to foreign policy debates. Building a bridge to Chapters 6 & 7, the chapter shows that due to the weak fit between official and societal constructions of the national interest, the intervening effect of domestic structures needs to be considered.

Chapters 6 & 7 present quantitative and qualitative evidence for the explanatory power of the theoretical argument for Chinese scholars and think tank analysts, respectively. Chapter 6 shows that when scholars were close to the state and when the state was open to their input, they influenced the official construction of China's national interest the most. In contrast, when they were distant from the state and when the state was not open to their input, they no longer influenced the official construction of the national interest. Chapter 7 also shows that the intervening variables, proximity to the state, and the state's openness to societal input influenced think tank analysts' ability to influence the official construction of the national interest, albeit to a more limited extent than for scholars.

Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the dissertation's key findings and main limitations. Its most important limitations are the sole focus on the rhetorical level, difficulties in assessing causality,

and potential challenges to its premises due to political change in China. The concluding chapter also discusses implications for future inquiries into China and other authoritarian regimes.