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

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2 Current understandings of constructions of China's national interest

Right from the beginning of his tenure, CCP General Secretary and PRC State President Xi Jinping made it clear that he intended to change the broad contours of China's foreign policy and associated rhetoric. By introducing vague but attention-grabbing slogans such as "One Belt, One Road" (一带一路), later turned into "Belt and Road Initiative" or the ominous "community of shared destiny" (命运共同体), he signaled that under his leadership the PRC should leave a more pronounced mark on international politics. Many international observers try to infer implications for China's international posture from his statements. However, statements from various Chinese foreign policy actors differ considerably from each other; as I demonstrated elsewhere (Mokry Forthcoming), focusing only on the highest echelons of the Chinese leadership does not allow us to fully capture what is behind these slogans, how the official construction of China's national interest shifted since Xi took power, and what explains these shifts.

In this chapter, I discuss existing explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest. Since current understandings of China's national interest conceive of it as static, they cannot account fully for how the official construction of China's national interest changed under Xi Jinping. In addition, since many of the existing explanations are derived from statist approaches, they center on the state's role and fail to capture societal actors' influence adequately. I first review how China's national interest and changes in China's national interest are portrayed in the existing literature. Then, I present, discuss, and refute explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest derived from statist approaches. These statist approaches consider leaders' beliefs, ideology, bureaucratic politics, and geopolitics as explanatory factors. Lastly, I introduce and evaluate societal approaches to explain changes in the official construction of China's national interest. I thereby show why, of all possible societal actors, including public opinion, NGOs, business interests, and experts, the latter group, which covers scholars working at universities and analysts working at think tanks, are the most likely societal

actors to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Due to its highly centralized authoritarian rule, the PRC is a hard case for examining societal actors' influence on foreign policy. Therefore, to answer the question under what conditions societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest, it makes sense to focus on the societal actors most likely to exert influence.

2.1 Portrayals of China's national interest and its changes

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. In this section, I review existing scholarship on China's national interest. Chapter 3 then offers a detailed conceptualization of the construction of the national interest.

Many scholars follow the official definition of China's national interest (Moore 2016; Shih and Huang 2015; Shih and Yin 2013; Tsang 2020; D. Zhang 2017).⁵ However, since the mid-1990s, Chinese scholars have put forward different conceptions of China's national interest (Shih and Yin 2013, 71). Yan Xuetong's (1996) foundational work distinguishes material interests covering security and development from what he calls "spiritual interests", that is, respect and recognition from the international community (1996). Wang Yizhou (2004) details development, sovereignty, and responsibility interests (2002). In his review of Chinese theorizing on national interests, Deng (1998) argues that "the Chinese definition of national interests is not a fixed and immutable attribute" (1998, 309). He instead describes the substantive content of the Chinese conception of

⁵ Many scholars find the definition Dai Bingguo put forward in 2009 when he was State Councilor for foreign affairs most succinct (Tsang 2020). He defined China's national interest as 'foremost, preserving China's basic state system and state security; after this, national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and in third place, sustain stable development of the economy and society' (第一是维护基本制度和国家安全, 其次是国家主权和领土完整, 第三是经济社会的持续稳定发展) (Feng (巫峰) Wu 2009). In addition, scholars mention that the first official definition of China's national interest appeared in the 2002 Defense White Paper (Shih and Yin 2013). This definition listed territorial integrity, economic development, social stability, the socialist system, and regional order (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2002).

national interests as dynamic and contested (ibid, p. 329). Similarly, Gupta (2012) summarizes three characteristics of national interest that Chinese scholars identified: First, they see national interests as “being shaped by the collective national culture, historical experiences, and national identity”. Second, they describe them as “relatively stable and deep principles that guide policies in the long term”. Third, even though they “represent the collective interests and aspirations of the nation”, there can be disagreement within various groups on the priority of these interests at any given time” (2012, 807).

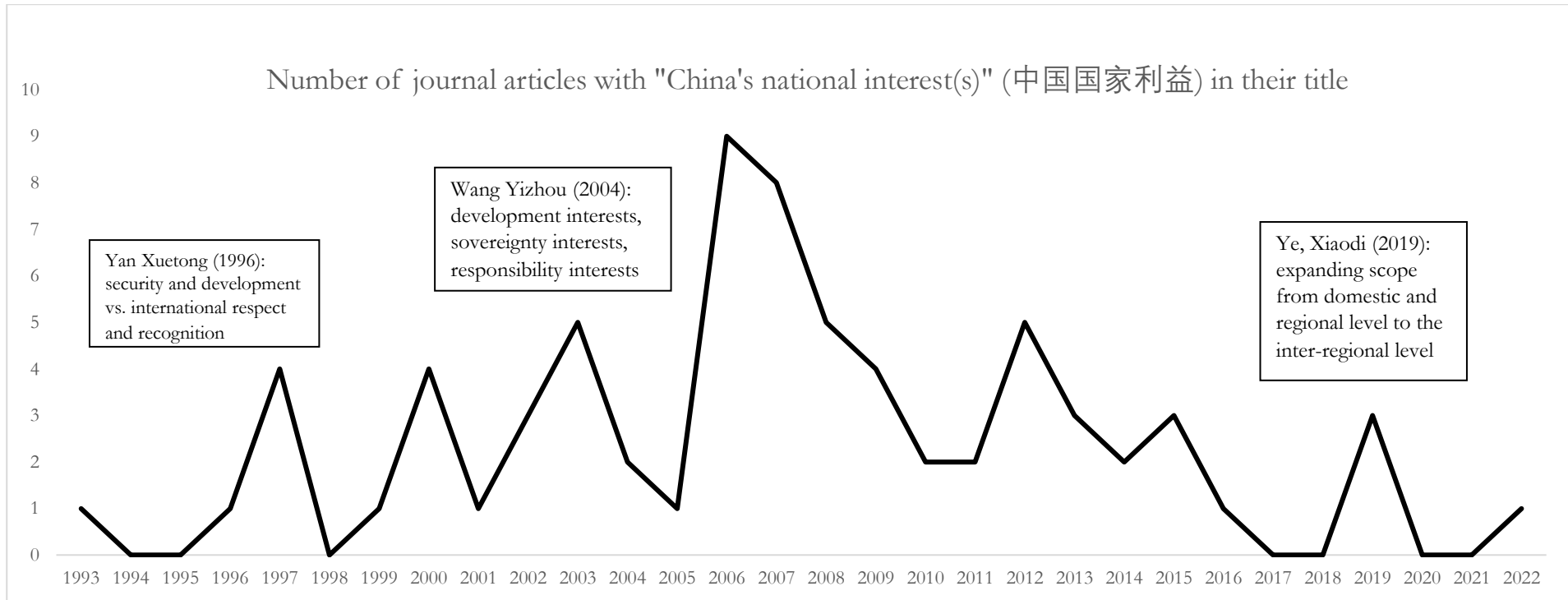
China’s more proactive foreign policy brought discussions about China’s national interest to the forefront of debates about China’s foreign policy. Carefully distinguishing core interest from national interest, Ye Xiaodi (2019) observes an expansion of the concept’s scope. He argues that China’s rising power status, strategic choices, and responses from neighboring countries all determined the changing scope of China’s national interest from the domestic and regional levels to the inter-regional one (2019, 78). In their review of debates among Chinese IR scholars about China’s national interest, Chen Qi and Liu Lanyu (2020) point to five topics of discussion: the strategic goal of national interests, the Sino-US relationship as the key to safeguarding national interests, methods, and practices of safeguarding national interest as well as the scope of national interests (2020, 64). They identify two contending viewpoints among Chinese scholars: On the one hand, some scholars argue that China should focus on increasing its global political power; others argue that economic development is key to maintaining China’s national interests (ibid).

Existing scholarship offers varying interpretations of China’s national interest. Figure 2.1 illustrates Chinese scholars’ debates about China’s national interest by tracing the amount of attention Chinese scholars have attributed to China’s national interest(s) since the 1990s. Since 1993, Chinese scholars have published 71 journal articles that had “China’s national interest(s)” (中国国家利益) in their title.⁶ There was a peak in interest between 2005 and 2008. Figure 2.1 further

⁶ Figure 2.1 presents data collected through the CNKI academic journals database. Articles with 中国国家利益 in the article title were searched on 07 February 2023.

maps key substantive points of the debate as discussed above. Some scholars acknowledge that China's national interest can change and has changed in recent years. However, so far, it has not yet systematically been traced how China's national interest has changed under Xi Jinping. In addition, existing accounts of China's national interest miss how domestic actors construct China's national interest.

Figure 2.1: Chinese scholars' debates about China's national interest(s)



2.2 Statist explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest

Located at different levels of analysis, statist approaches to explain changes in the official construction of China's national interest center around leaders' beliefs, ideological factors, bureaucratic actors, and geopolitics. In the following section, I review the logic of these approaches and evaluate their strengths and limitations for explaining changes in the official construction of China's national interest. Table 2.1 provides a summary of these approaches and their explanatory potential.

Much research on the transformation of China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping starts by trying to discern how Xi sees the world. Most recently, Rudd (2022) describes China's foreign policy under Xi as "turbocharged by a Marxist-inspired belief that history is irreversibly on China's side and that a world anchored in Chinese power would produce a more just international order" (2022, 10). According to Zhang Feng (2016), Xi is convinced of China's historical destiny to play "a global role commensurate with its growing power and influence on the global stage" (2016, 120). Methodologically, the authors mostly describe Xi's personal background and extrapolate implications for China's foreign policy. Hu Weixing (2019), for example, ascribes a strong sense of historical responsibility because of his father's involvement in the Communist Revolution. He describes Xi as more courageous and risk-tolerant than his predecessors, possessing a clear vision for the nation and himself (Hu 2019, 8). In contrast, operational code analysis is a more systematic approach focusing on leaders. Drawing on official statements, Kai He and Feng Huiyun (2013) describe differences in the outlook of Chinese leadership generations (2013).

Drawing on leaders' beliefs to explain changes in the official construction of China's national comes with two limitations. First, establishing direct links between leaders' world views and the minutiae of how the national interest is constructed is difficult because leaders' world views primarily relate to broad foreign policy goals. Second, pinning down exactly what leaders' beliefs are is hard because getting access to China's top leadership is very difficult. Feng Huiyun and Kai

He (2016), for example, admit that because of the complexity of China's foreign policy-making process and the opacity of its political system, it "is difficult to gauge what political leaders really perceive" (2016, 694f.). Hence, any description of Xi's worldview comes, or should at least come, with an assessment of the degree of speculation involved. While these limitations should be acknowledged, under highly centralized authoritarian rule, leaders can undoubtedly 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. Hence, changes in the official construction of China's national interest could be caused by changes in leaders' beliefs.

Many scholars try to assess how and how much ideology influences China's foreign policy rhetoric and behavior. Analyzing reports to the party congress between 1977 and 2012, Cha Chang Hoon (2017) finds that the Marxist-Leninist worldview has been replaced with China's new political ideology based on material interest (2017, 416). Mayer (2018) observes that the CCP tries to synthesize Marxism, folk traditions, Confucianism, and liberalism (2018, 1218). Scholars try to discern ideology's effect on foreign policy behavior. Kevin Cai (2020) argues that China's sustained attention to developing countries can be attributed to the lingering effects of Marxism (K. G. Cai 2020). Going beyond Marxism, Song Weiqing (2020) examines China's normative foreign policy more broadly. He argues that "China has a long tradition of promoting its favored norms in the international arena, both overtly and tacitly" (2020, 230). He sees that under Xi Jinping, "the normative agenda of Chinese foreign policy has been assertively upgraded and strongly implemented" (ibid, p. 245). In practice, this plays out in the Chinese government "implementing a grand strategy to reshape the regional order in Asia, and eventually the global order, with new ideas, norms, and rules for international relations and global governance" (ibid, p. 246).

The review of the literature has shown that the CCP's ideology, especially in its application to foreign policy, is a combination of many different ideological currents from Marxism to liberalism, which makes it difficult to trace ideological factors in the official construction of China's

national interest. However, given the renewed focus on ideology under Xi Jinping (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018; S. Zhao 2016), ideological factors should shape the official construction of China's national interest and hence, can be expected to hold substantial explanatory potential for changes in the official construction of China's national interest. Hence, CCP ideology could shape the construction of China's national interest.

The bureaucratic politics approach focuses on the foreign policy process and tries to explain how foreign policy decisions are made (Graham and Halperin 1972). Applying it to the study of Chinese foreign policy, Lai Hongyi and Su-Jeong Kang (2014) highlight three aspects scholars should pay attention to, the agencies involved, their respective responsibilities, and how inter-agency coordination takes place. They argue that in many areas, specifically trade, finance, economy, climate change, soft power, and military affairs, other ministries, and bureaucratic agencies than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have come to exert significant and growing influence (Lai and Kang 2014, 294f.). Bureaucratic politics has been used extensively to explain China's position in the South China Sea maritime disputes. For example, Jones (2017) argues that the MFA and the military's parochial interests shaped domestic contestations over China's role in the South China Sea during the 1980s (2017, 362f.). Zhang Feng (2019) even points out that the rivalry between these two actors and the maritime law-enforcement agencies threatened the effectiveness of China's foreign strategy (2019a, 780).

The bureaucratic politics approach helps scholars not to treat China as a monolithic actor because it draws attention to different domestic actors involved. One might expect that the approach lost its explanatory potential in light of the ongoing centralization processes of (foreign) policy-making under Xi Jinping. However, Cabestan (2020), in his detailed assessment of China's foreign and security policy institutions and decision-making under Xi Jinping, argues that the "centralization and coordination effort" was unable to make the approach irrelevant because the fragmentation tendencies in China's polity continue. While Xi is no longer *primus inter pares*, he cannot ignore the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee. Apart from this, the new

coordination bodies he established do not meet frequently and rely on staff from different institutions tasked with foreign policy. Cabestan concludes that the tensions between diplomats and representatives of Chinese commercial interests and between diplomats and the military continue to dominate the institutional set-up of China's foreign policy-making (Cabestan 2021). The approach's explanatory focus is on foreign policy decisions which can make applying it to the longer-term evolution of China's national interest difficult. Yet, the approach suggests that various domestic actors could construct China's national interest.

Statist approaches do not only cover actors within the state but also developments in the state's external environment. Theoretical approaches focusing on geopolitics pose that the external environment shapes a country's foreign policy and that any state seeks to maximize its power relative to other states to guarantee its survival in an anarchic international system. Kevin Cai (2020) argues that this is particularly true for China because it finds itself in a "strategically vulnerable position with perceived threats from almost all directions and the possibility of being encircled by potential rivals" (2020, 357). Sources of Chinese power he lists are geographical size and location, population size, economic capacity, and military capabilities (ibid). Similarly, Li Xiaoting (2016) explains that offensive realism would expect states to "pay close attention to geography and the local power balance" (2016, 243).

Applying any of these realist approaches to foreign policy suggests that the official construction of China's national interest reflects the government's reaction to external developments. Hence, the state's main goal of maximizing its power compared to other states would be reflected in how it constructs its national interest.

Table 2.1: Statist explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest

Level of analysis	Explanatory focus	Explanation for changes in the official construction of China's national interest
Individual level	Leaders' beliefs	In the PRC's highly centralized authoritarian system, the leader alone determines the official construction of China's national interest.
State level	Ideological factors	The CCP's ideology determines the official construction of China's national interest.
State level	Interactions between bureaucratic actors	Various foreign policy actors shape the official construction of China's national interest.
International system	Geopolitics	The official construction of China's national interest reflects the Chinese government's reactions to external developments and attempts to maximize its relative power vis à vis other states.

2.3 Refutation of statist explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest

Leaders' beliefs, ideological factors, interactions between bureaucratic actors, or geopolitics could shape the official construction of China's national interest. In this section, I deduce hypotheses for each approach discussed above and present original empirical evidence to refute these explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest derived from statist approaches.

Building on the research on the role of leaders' beliefs in foreign policy change discussed above, the leader alone determines the official construction of China's national interest in the PRC's highly centralized system.

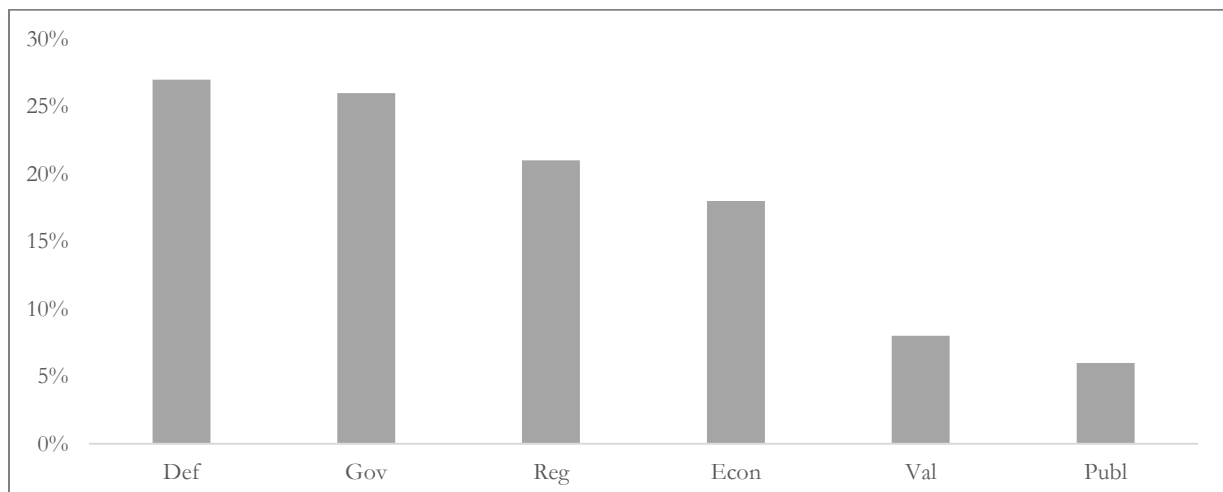
H Leaders' beliefs: If Xi Jinping alone determined the official construction of China's national interest, other foreign policy actors' statements and societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates would match his statements.

To assess whether this hypothesis is confirmed or not, I compare the patterns of relative salience of the different components of the construction of the national interest in foreign policy statements issued by Xi Jinping to statements by other foreign policy actors in the Chinese system and the patterns of relative salience of components of constructions of the national interest in societal actors' contributions. I understand the substantive content of the official construction of

the national interest to consist of several components. To identify these components in the official construction of a country's national interest in official foreign policy statements, I link the basic needs Nuechterlein describes in his conception of the national interest to more recent empirical accounts of national interests in the IR literature in the conceptualization of the construction of China's national interest in Chapter 3. The six components I distinguish are *defend China's territory, political system, and citizens, expand China's external relations, lead global governance, promote China's values, control the region, and offer global public goods*.

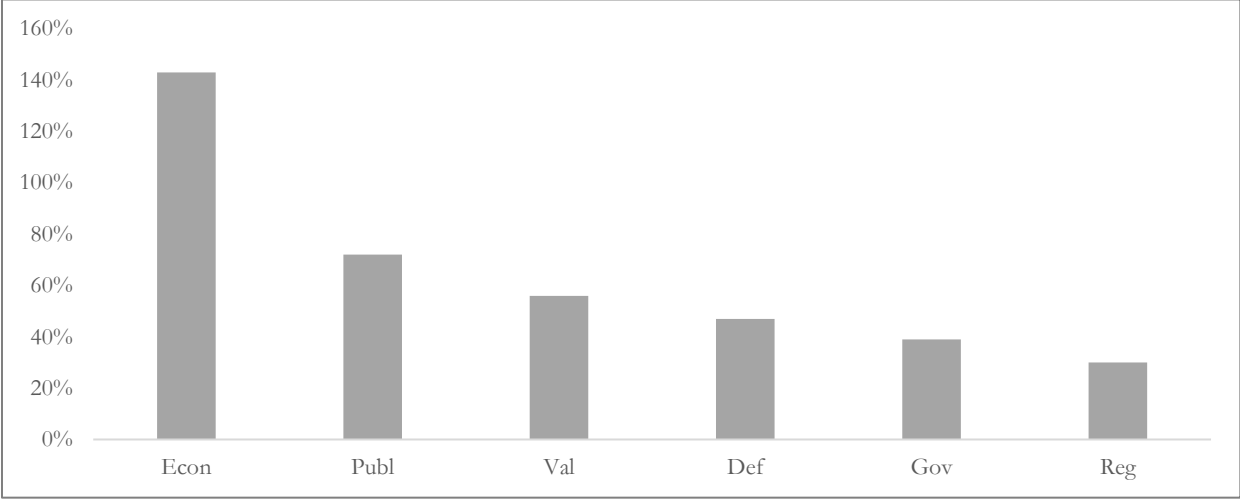
Over the analyzed time frame, important differences emerge in how salient the different components of the constructions of the national interest are in Xi Jinping's and other foreign policy actors' statements, including the Premier, the State Council Information Office, and the Foreign Minister. Figure 2.2 presents the aggregated differences in relative salience in Xi's statements compared to the other actors' statements for each of the six components of the official construction of the national interest that I distinguish. The biggest differences in relative salience appeared in the construction of national interest *defend China's territory, political system, and citizens* and in *lead global governance*. Differences in relative salience between Xi and other foreign policy actors were smallest for *promote China's values* and *offer global public goods*.

Figure 2.2: Aggregated differences in relative salience of components of the construction of China's national interest between Xi and other foreign policy actors



Differences between Xi Jinping and societal actors were even more pronounced, as Figure 2.3 demonstrates. Aggregated differences in the relative salience of the components of the constructions of the national interest between societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates and Xi Jinping's statements were the biggest for *expand China's economic relations*. The closest match between how much attention Xi Jinping and societal actors attributed to certain components of the construction of the national interest was for *lead global governance* and *control the region*, but there were still important differences between societal actors and Xi Jinping.

Figure 2.3: Aggregated differences in relative salience of components of the construction of China's national interest between Xi and societal actors



To sum up, the claim that Xi Jinping alone determines the official construction of China's national interest is refuted because there are critical differences between his statements and those of other foreign policy actors as well as societal actors.

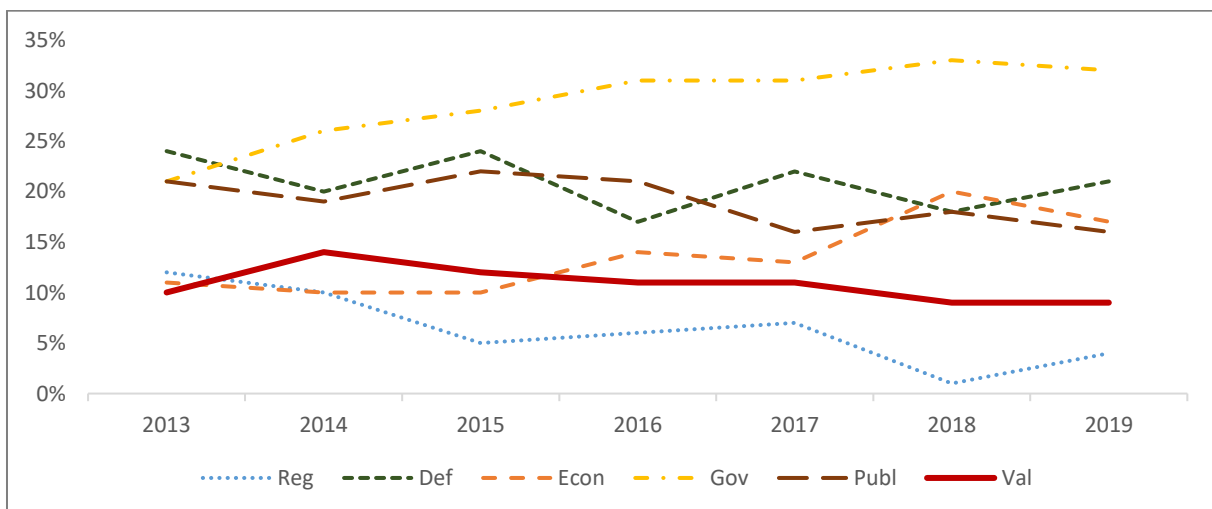
Given the renewed focus on ideology under Xi Jinping, one could expect that the CCP's ideology determines the official construction of China's national interest.

H Ideology: *If ideology shaped the official construction of China's national interest, the component of the construction of national interest, "promote China's values," would be the dominant component of the construction of China's national interest in official foreign policy statements throughout the time frame.*

To assess whether this is the case, I identify the component of the official construction of China’s national interest with the strongest links to the CCP’s ideology. Out of the six components of the official construction of China’s national interest that I conceptualize in Chapter 3, *defend China’s territory, political system, and citizens, expand China’s external economic relations, lead global governance, promote China’s values, control the region, and offer global public goods, promote China’s values* is the component of the official construction of the national interest that best encapsulates the CCP’s ideological ambitions. Hence, I compare the relative salience of *promote China’s values* to the relative salience of other components of the official construction of China’s national interest.

Figure 2.4 shows that the component of the construction of national interest *promote China’s values* is not the most prominent component. In 2013, this component of the official construction of national interest was actually among the least salient. After briefly gaining in salience until 2014, it continually lost salience compared to the other components of the construction of China’s national interest. In 2019, it was the second least prominent component of the official construction of the national interest. Hence, ideological factors did not shape the official construction of China’s national interest.

Figure 2.4: Relative salience of components of the official construction of China's national interest over time

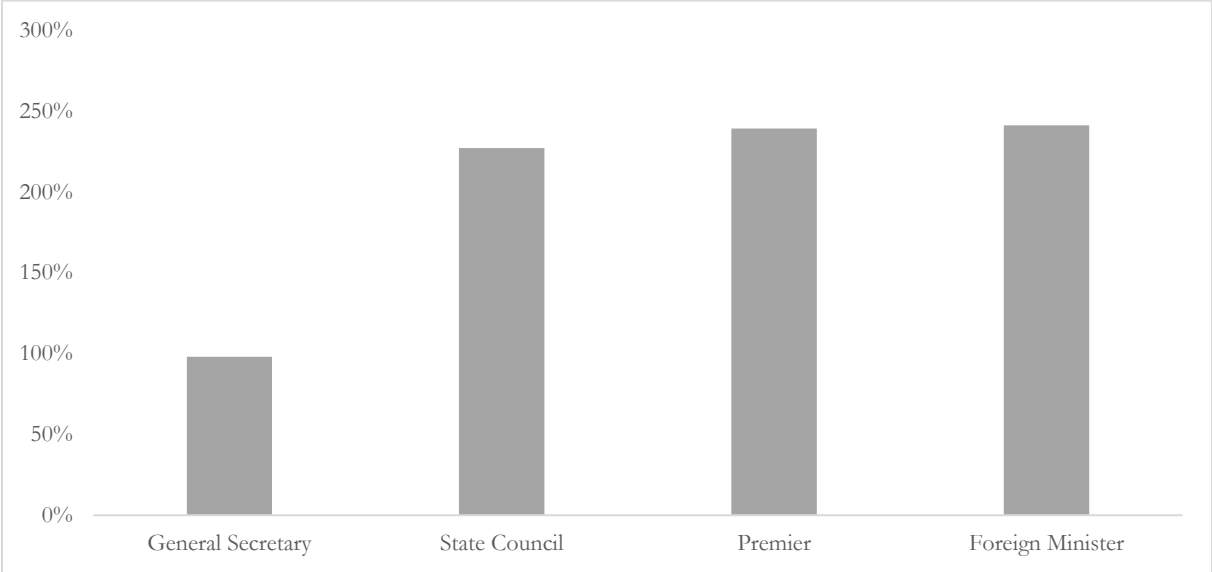


Applying the bureaucratic politics approach to explaining changes in the official construction of China’s national interest, one would expect various foreign policy actors to shape the official construction of China’s national interest.

H Bureaucratic actors: *If bureaucratic actors shape the official construction of China’s national interest, how they reflect the construction of China’s national interest would reflect the official construction of China’s national interest.*

If this hypothesis applies, there are no differences between the relative salience of the different components of the national interest in the foreign policy statements of the different foreign policy actors and the official construction of China’s national interest. However, as Figure 2.5 illustrates, there are considerable differences between how the State Council, the Premier, and the Foreign Minister individually construct China’s national interest and the official construction of the national interest. In comparison, the differences between the General Secretary’s construction of the national interest and the official construction of the national interest are a lot smaller.

Figure 2.5: Aggregated differences in relative salience of components of the construction of China’s national interest between bureaucratic actors

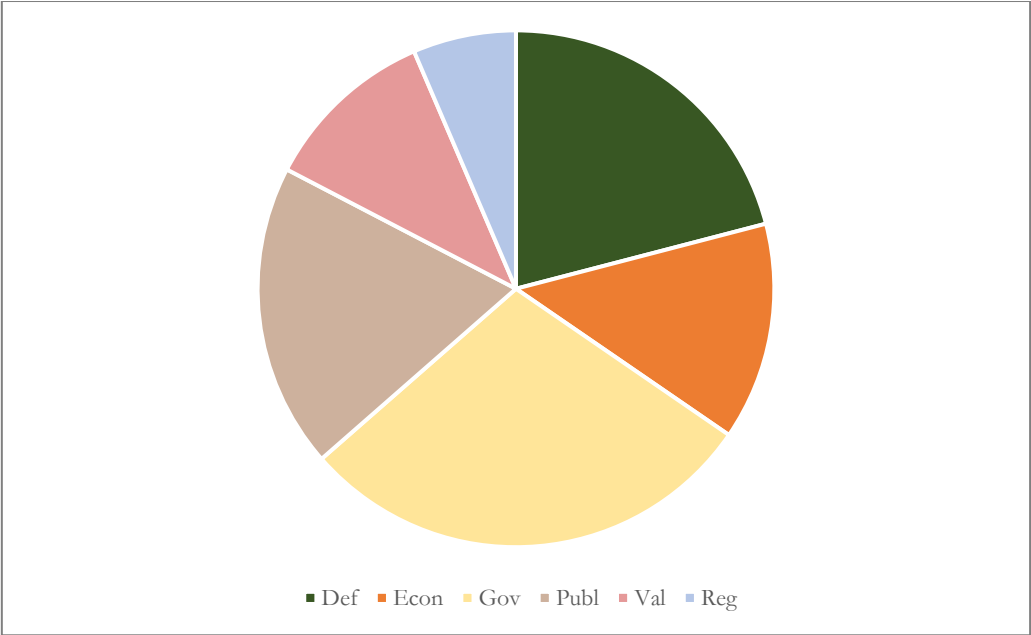


Lastly, system-level factors could explain changes in the official construction of China’s national interest. Based on the discussion above, one could argue that the regime tries to maximize its relative power vis à vis other states by expressing its national interest.

H Geopolitics: *If the goal was maximizing relative power, then the components of the official construction of China’s national interest, “defend China’s territory, citizens, and political system” and “expand China’s external economic relations” would consistently dominate the official construction of China’s national interest.*

Figure 2.6 shows that neither the component *defend China’s territory, political system, and citizens* nor *expand China’s economic relations* dominated China’s official foreign policy statements. Instead, *lead global governance* emerges as the most salient component of the official construction of the national interest. While *defend China’s territory, political system, and citizens* plays an important role; it is equally important as *offer global public goods*.

Figure 2.6: Aggregated salience of components of the official construction of China's national interest



In this section, I showed that statist approaches fail to explain the observed changes in the official construction of China’s national interest. Neither explanations centering on the role of leaders or bureaucratic actors nor reasonings that draw on ideological factors or system-level variables can account for how the official construction of China’s national interest changed under

Xi Jinping. Hence, in the next section, I will present societal approaches to explain changes in the official construction of China's national interest.

2.4 Societal explanations for changes in the official construction of China's national interest

Based on a review of the existing literature, I show that even under highly centralized authoritarian rule, societal actors can influence the official construction of China's national interest. Assessing the potential influence of public opinion, NGOs, business interests, and experts, in the next section, I argue why it makes sense to focus on experts, more specifically university scholars and think tank analysts, to examine under what conditions Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest.

In the Chinese foreign policy literature, public opinion is commonly examined through two sources: nationalist protests and public opinion surveys. The literature on links between protests and Chinese foreign policy mainly discusses how the Chinese government manages and uses nationalist or anti-foreign protests. Weiss (2013) argues that Chinese leaders use protests as “a costly signal by which they can credibly invoke the pressure of public opinion and reveal domestic constraints on foreign policy” (2013, 2). Hence, they use the management of nationalist protests to signal their diplomatic intentions (*ibid*, p. 30). Reilly (2014) describes how the state allows or even encourages protests which then can influence its “negotiating strategy, official rhetoric and even foreign policy decisions” (2014, 198). He further observes that as soon as these protests begin to threaten China's core interests, especially if they might undermine social stability at home, Chinese leaders resort to repression and persuasion to reign in the protests. Regarding the substance of Chinese public opinion, existing research focuses on the use of military force and nationalist views. Through a survey experiment, Bell and Quek (2018) find that the Chinese public is as reluctant to use force against democracies as the public in Western democracies (2018, 227). In contrast, Weiss (2019) finds that Chinese attitudes are generally hawkish. In surveys, for example, most

respondents endorse more reliance on military strength, support increased defense spending, and approve the sending of troops to disputed islands in the South and East China Sea (2019, 682). More generally, Zhao Suisheng (2013) observes that the Chinese government “has become increasingly reluctant to constrain the expression of popular nationalism” (2013, 536). While he sees that “the average Chinese found a growing number of ways to express their nationalist feelings and impose pressure upon foreign policy-makers to be firm in protecting China’s national interests”, he argues that the most important change is a “convergence of Chinese state nationalism and popular nationalism” (ibid).

Some scholars try to estimate in what ways and how much public opinion shapes China’s foreign policy. Examining the intensification of China’s on-water assertiveness in disputed areas of maritime East Asia, Chubb (2019) finds that “plausible examples of bottom-up sentiments driving on-water actions are much rarer than commonly assumed” (2019, 159). In contrast, Quek and Johnston (2017) find through a survey experiment that “Chinese leaders may have more agency in the face of public opinion during a crisis than they believe” (2017, 11). Examining the crisis with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, they find that the Chinese leadership had several strategies available if they were willing to de-escalate in the early stages of the crisis (ibid). Hence, even research on similar issues comes to different conclusions regarding the impact of public opinion on China’s foreign policy. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the state shapes public opinion. Frances Yaping Wang (2021), for example, argues that the state uses media campaigns to “align public opinion with their preferred foreign policy for purposes of both domestic regime survival and international security” (2021, 519). While it has been well established that the public plays at least some role in shaping China’s foreign policy, the specific mechanisms are still largely unknown. This makes it difficult to examine under which conditions members of the public influence the official construction of China’s national interest.

The literature contains general descriptions of how NGOs⁷ influence China's foreign policy. For example, Su Changhe (2010) lists NGOs as one of the increasing numbers of actors that "have developed their roles in the Chinese diplomatic system" (2010, 314) but quickly acknowledges that "civil society's effect on China's diplomatic transformation is difficult to evaluate (ibid, p. 325). While they have to some extent, built transnational channels of exchange, shaped agendas, and promoted governance values, he sees them primarily as agents of public diplomacy (ibid). Similarly, Yang Yanling (2019) finds that non-state actors are increasingly important for disseminating soft power (2019, 42). Specific descriptions of NGOs' involvement in selected issue areas provide a more detailed picture of how Chinese NGOs can influence Chinese foreign policy in these narrowly defined issue areas. For example, Lin Peng (2021) focuses on humanitarian diplomacy and argues that "private foundations and civil NGOs have played active roles in the state-dominated cooperation in disaster management" (2021, 221). Based on their growing capacity and expertise, they are not only more involved in disaster management abroad but have also "begun to engage in lobbying and advocacy efforts to influence policy-making related to the regulation of NGO participation in crisis management at home and even abroad" (ibid, p. 231). In addition, scholars found that Chinese NGOs had some influence on the Chinese government's ban on ivory sales, an issue that is at least remotely related to foreign policy. Gamso (2019) shows that NGOs launched campaigns to educate the public and tried to mobilize popular opinion to make the Chinese government ban ivory sales (2019, 1392).

The literature on how Chinese NGOs shape China's foreign offers interesting insights into their influence on foreign policy in specific instances in narrowly defined issue areas. However, since in this dissertation, I focus on uncovering under what conditions Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest, a fairly abstract concept covering

⁷ As discussed in the Introduction, in the Chinese context, societal actors are never completely independent from the state. This makes it difficult to speak about "non-governmental" organizations. However, since this is a literature review, I decided to follow the scholars cited here and use this term as well.

different issue areas, Chinese NGOs are not a suitable focus because of the narrowly defined issue areas they focus on.

It has become fairly common to argue that business interests drive China's external behavior (Lai and Kang, 2012, p. 113, see, for example). Due to the global expansion of their operations, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), in particular, increasingly try to influence Chinese foreign policy. Arguing that "Chinese CSOEs [central-level SOEs] have become increasingly important actors in the formulation and execution of Beijing's policy in the South China Sea", Gong Xue (2018) distinguishes three approaches that describe the relationship between SOEs and government policy in this area. First, some SOEs try to influence policy and "proactively align their business interests with the country's maritime interests and present themselves as defenders of the national interest." Second, other SOEs respond to policy incentives that the central government provides. They engage in policy facilitation if their business interests match the policy environment. Third, SOEs can also be policy-takers who serve as political tools and undertake strategic tasks for the state (2018, 302). Frequently referred to substantial changes in China's foreign policy resulting from business lobbying include the Chinese government substantially increasing its efforts to protect Chinese citizens abroad (Ghiselli 2021) and its attempts to influence economic policies in other countries to protect the investments made by companies and ensure that loans offered by Chinese actors are being repaid. Less tangibly but equally important, business actors' growing involvement in foreign policy-making also changes domestic and international expectations. For example, loans offered by Chinese policy banks could provide Beijing with financial leverage over distressed borrowers that the Chinese government could then use to advance its interests. At the same time, global business activities by Chinese actors increase pressure from other actors in the international system to assume more international responsibilities (Downs 2011).

Based on the existing literature, two reasons indicate that business interests are not a suitable focus for uncovering under what conditions societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest. First, similar to the NGOs discussed above, their influence

tends to be concentrated on specific policy fields or even individual policies, whereas in this dissertation, I am interested in explaining broad changes in China's national interest. The second factor is of a more practical nature. Getting access, especially to state-owned enterprises, is difficult, making it hard to collect sufficient data to examine under what conditions business actors influenced the official construction of China's national interest.

Many scholars point to Chinese foreign policy experts as the group of societal actors that is most capable of influencing China's foreign policy. Focusing either on think tanks or scholars, researchers even worked out through which channels Chinese foreign policy experts can influence China's foreign policy (Abb 2015; K. He, Feng, and Yan 2019). However, despite excellent work on foreign policy-making processes in China, we do not know when and how much Chinese scholars and think tankers influence the official construction of China's national interest. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap. Chinese think tanks can influence Chinese foreign policy in direct and indirect ways. Hua Xin (2017) finds that "particularly the country's highly specialized foreign policy research institutes are now playing a very influential role in China's foreign policy-making" (2017, 133). Abb and Koellner (2015) argue that Chinese think-tankers mostly perform three activities: They provide policy advice to officials, enhance their academic clout, and supply expert analysis in the media (2015). In addition, Hua Xin (2017) argues that think tanks have long-term indirect influence through research projects they conduct for the government. Their indirect influence can be observed through participation in high-level forums and bilateral meetings with state officials (Hua 2017). Kai He and Feng Huiyun (2019) sketch four ways scholars and policy-makers are linked in the Chinese context: First, Chinese IR scholars can influence Chinese foreign policy because they belong to relevant epistemic communities. Second, scholars contribute to a "free market of ideas" from which the government can choose. Third, the Chinese government can draw upon scholars to test controversial ideas. Fourth, academic debates can "mirror the underlying transformations of Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics (2019, 4). While Feng, He, and their collaborators find empirical evidence for all four models, they claim that "the free

market model” is the most widespread. This means that Chinese scholars put out their ideas to be consumed by policy-makers (K. He, Feng, and Yan 2019, 196). Pu and Wang (2018) combine the mirror policy and signaling models. They observe that Chinese IR scholars can serve as “mirrors” to reflect the orientation of Chinese policy-makers (Pu and Wang 2018). More abstractly, Xu Jin (2016) finds that “(..) consistency of ideas between policy-makers and scholars has a significant impact on foreign policy-making (2016, 460). However, it is important to keep in mind that, as Glaser and Medeiros (2007) state, experts “can influence government policy – albeit at different times and to varying degrees” (2007, 309).

Out of all the societal actors discussed, scholars and think tank analysts are the most likely group to influence China’s foreign policy. Hence, in this dissertation, I will focus on these actors to determine under what conditions Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China’s national interest. Researchers generally agree that scholars and think-tankers can somewhat influence China’s foreign policy. Most of the existing research on Chinese scholars’ influence on foreign policy details ways of influence and refrains from offering a clear assessment of how much influence they have. In this dissertation, I fill this gap by examining the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of China’s national interest. In addition, the dissertation will tease out possible differences between think tank analysts and scholars based at universities.

2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I summarized current understandings of the official construction of China’s national interest and explanations for its changes. I showed that such explanations can be derived from statist and societal approaches. Statist explanations centering on leaders’ beliefs, bureaucratic politics, ideological factors, and geopolitics were refuted through empirical evidence on the patterns in changes in the official construction of China’s national interest. The review of societal approaches demonstrated that out of the many different societal actors, including the general public,

NGOs, business interests, and experts at Chinese universities and think tanks, experts are the most likely group of societal actors to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Hence, it makes the most sense to focus on experts to uncover the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest.

The next chapter introduces the dissertation's theoretical argument that describes the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of the national interest. Drawing on the existing literature, I conceptualize the study's dependent and independent variables and describe the structural variables that condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest, that is, societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input.