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

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Citation

Mokry, S. (2023, November 14). *The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3656754>

Version: Publisher's Version

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5 Official and societal constructions of China's national interest

The gap between theory and practice is invoked frequently in international relations. Drawing on experiences in the academic and policy worlds, George (1994) recounts how “the eyes of policy specialists quickly glaze at the first mention of the word “theory”” (1994, 147). At the same time, academics might not agree on much, but share the belief that policy-makers are too “aconceptual and atheoretical”, at times, even “anticonceptual and antitheoretical” (ibid., 151). Describing two cultures of academia and policy-making, George argues that academics and policy-makers are socialized into different professional and intellectual worlds, define their interest in international relations differently, and pursue different objectives in their work, which all make it difficult to communicate with each other. These observations suggest a big gap between foreign policy and foreign policy debates. This chapter takes up these claims and examines whether such a gap between theory, here experts' constructions of China's national interest, and practice, in the context of this dissertation, the official construction of China's national interest, materializes in the Chinese context.

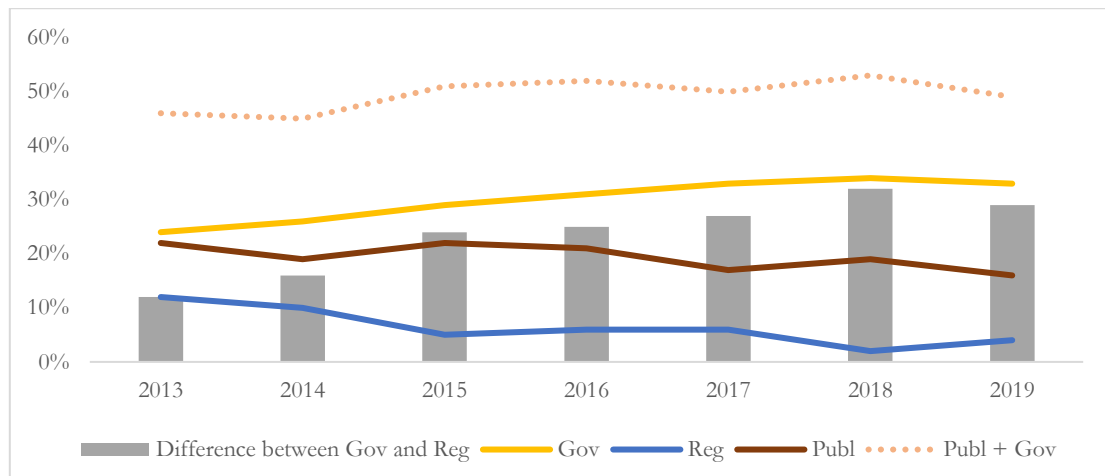
In the dissertation's first empirical chapter, I demonstrate that the official and societal constructions of China's national interest do not match perfectly. First, I describe variation in the official construction of China's national interest, the study's dependent variable. This variation entails changes in emphasis on the different components of the construction of China's national interest and shifts in policy substance. In the following sections, I detail scholars' and think tanks' constructions of the national interest, respectively. Finally, I demonstrate 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 different components of China's national interest and in the prevalence of shifts in policy substance between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest.

5.1 Official constructions of China's national interest

The analysis of frames in Chinese foreign policy statements revealed striking shifts in how much attention the Chinese government attributed to the different components of the construction of China's national interest that I conceptualized in Chapter 3 and operationalized in Chapter 4 since Xi Jinping took power in 2012/2013. While *lead global governance* became more important over time, *control the region* became less important. Figure 5.1 illustrates these shifts in emphasis. It further shows that the differences in emphasis between the two components of the construction of China's national interest increased significantly between 2013 and 2017 and were particularly pronounced in 2018.

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the differences between *lead global governance* and *offer global public goods* are not always clear-cut. When combining the two, a similar pattern emerges for the assessment of relative salience. However, upon closer look, when disentangling these two components of the construction of the national interest as best as possible, as discussed in Chapter 4, one sees that while the relative salience of *lead global governance* has constantly been increasing, *offer global public goods* has decreased after 2016. The shifts in relative salience over time for the other components of the construction of China's national interest, *defend China's territory*, *political system*, *and citizens*, *expand economic relations*, and *promote China's values* were less pronounced. For details on the relative salience of these components, see the evidence presented to refute the alternative explanations in Chapter 2. Since *lead global governance* and *control the region* showed the most interesting variation over time, the subsequent analyses focus on those two components of the official construction of China's national interest.

Figure 5.1: Relative salience of selected components of the construction of China's national interest



In the following, I examine the shifts in policy substance behind these changes in emphasis. The first shift in policy substance to discuss in detail relates to descriptions of China's confidence and international standing. Over time, Chinese foreign policy statements emphasized China's confidence more. In 2014, the Foreign Minister described the Chinese government as pursuing "salient Chinese features, style and confidence" (使对外工作具备鲜明的中国特色、中国风格、中国气派) in its foreign policy (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2014c). Four years later, the CCP General Secretary/State President called for "adhering to strategic confidence and maintaining strategic resolve" (坚持战略自信和保持战略定力) at the Central Work Conference for Foreign Affairs (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2018). Increased confidence is attributed to the Chinese government and the Chinese people. First, in 2016, the Foreign Minister described China's foreign policy as more proactive, enterprising, confident, and mature (中国外交更加主动, 更加进取, 更加自信, 更加成熟) (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2016), then, three years later, he depicted the Chinese people as "more confident and capable than ever in achieving the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" (中国人民比以往任何时候都更有信心更有能力实现中华民族伟大复兴) in front of the UN General Assembly (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2019). These changed descriptions of China's confidence are closely related to changes in the descriptions of China's international standing. First, the Chinese

government was portrayed as seeing that it had raised China's international standing (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2013a, 2015), and China was described as being in an advantageous position to set the pace and shape events (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2016). A year later, frames about China's increased international standing were replaced by frames describing a rise in China's power to shape (塑造力进一步提高) (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017c). Later, China was described as being at the rightful place among the world's nations (Wang, Qishan (王岐山) 2019).

How the Chinese government envisions its role in international politics also shifted over time. First, the Chinese government pointed out deficits in the status quo. Over time, it saw these deficits as becoming bigger. In 2017, the CCP General Secretary/State President described deficits in peace, development, and governance (和平赤字、发展赤字、治理赤字) that humans were facing (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017d). Two years later, the Chinese government described a *growing* deficit in governance, trust, peace, and development (治理赤字、信任赤字、和平赤字、发展赤字越来越大) (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019). At the BRICS summit in 2019, Xi Jinping described the world economy as facing a *greater* deficit of governance, development, and trust (治理赤字、发展赤字、信任赤字有增无减) (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2019c). From the Chinese government's descriptions of its relationship with the international community, one can infer its growing ambitions to take on a leadership role in international politics. In 2014, the CCP General Secretary/State President described China as having closer than ever interactions with the international community (我国同国际社会的互联互通也已变得空前紧密) (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2014a). The Chinese government described China as an important member of the international community (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2014a) and as working with the international community (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2014, 2016) before it described itself as "actively guiding the international community" (积极引导国际社会) (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2016) and as offering the

international community a “new option” (提供了新的选择) (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019).

The Chinese government also detailed how it wants to lead global governance. It not only put forward that it will pursue political solutions (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2017b) but that other states should do the same (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019; Wang, Yi (王毅) 2014b). The solutions that the Chinese government offers became more specific over time: First, the Chinese government described itself as publicly supporting China’s solutions (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2013b), then the Chinese government was characterized as providing “new solutions to global economic problems” (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2015), and later as bringing solutions to international and regional conflicts (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2018). From a close look at how the community of shared future, one of the Chinese government’s most prominent foreign policy slogans, was framed, one can infer the Chinese government’s ambitions to lead global governance. Here, policy substance shifted from the vague notion of “strengthening a sense of community of shared future” (强化命运共同体意识) (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017b) to a specification of what the Chinese government meant by it, that is converging interests and a high degree of interdependence (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2018a). In 2019, the notion of a *global* community of shared future was introduced (人类命运共同体思想) (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019), suggesting an expansion in focus. Besides, the Belt and Road Initiative was described as a platform for implementing this idea (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019).

To grasp shifts in the Chinese government’s perspective on global (economic) governance and its reforms, it is necessary to examine how it described deficits and problems in this area. In 2015, the Chinese government claimed that the global governance system had yet to accommodate changes in the international system (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2015). More recently, it identified inequality as a key problem for global economic governance (Xi, Jinping (习近平)

2019a). While the Chinese government had already, in 2013, put forward that it would work seriously with others to reform the international economic governance system (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2013a), more recently, it claimed that it had already contributed to improving global economic governance (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2018a; Wang, Yi (王毅) 2015). This shift also appeared in the broader depiction of global governance reform: First, the Chinese government put forward that it had a keen sense of responsibility in shaping the reform of the global governance system (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2016), then it described how it was involved in its reform. In another indicative example, the Chinese government first claimed that it worked with others to reform the global governance system, then described that it took on a leadership role in reforming it (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2015b, 2018). In 2018, the Chinese government put forward that it contributed more ideas to reform the global governance system (Li, Keqiang (李克强) 2018). A year later, it specified this notion by claiming that the Belt and Road Initiative was a response to calls for improving the global governance system (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2019b).

In addition, the Chinese government seeks to take on a leadership role by providing international public goods. There was a slight shift from the Chinese government providing more public goods (Wang, Yi (王毅) 2013b, 2017a; Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2016b) to the Chinese government providing more and *better* public goods (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019). Regarding the Chinese government's provision of foreign aid, it first put forward that it should do a good job in providing foreign aid (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2014a). There was also a specification that more money should go into aid for environmental protection (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2014). Then, there was a shift in degree towards increasing assistance (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) 2016; Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017c). Most recently, providing foreign aid was directly linked to mutual trust (State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2019).

Over time, there was less emphasis on regional cooperation mechanisms and processes in the official construction of China's national interest. The regional context faded more and more. Specifically, there was a shift in the Chinese government's position from expanding (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2013b) and publicly supporting regional cooperation (Li, Keqiang (李克强) 2014; Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2013a, 2015a) to only contributing towards it (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) 2016; State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2017). While regional security was an important issue in foreign policy statements around 2016/2017, there were far fewer references afterward. Many frames that referred to Asia or the Asia-Pacific disappeared over time. In addition, there was more emphasis on what different organizations and their members should be doing in the region and less on China's role. For example, members of regional organizations, most importantly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, were called upon to provide regional security. Here the focus shifted from providing credible security guarantees (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2014b) to more general calls for regional security and stability (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2017b).

The patterns in relative salience of the different components of the construction of China's national interest matched the observed shifts in policy substance. Since 2013, the Chinese government has been putting more emphasis on taking on a leading role in global governance. This was reinforced by shifts in policy substance outlining its ambitions for global governance reform. In contrast, the Chinese government put less emphasis on *control the region*. The descriptions of the role it envisions itself taking in regional cooperation became less ambitious over time. Instead, it put more emphasis on what other organizations should be doing. Three additional key findings emerge from the analysis of shifts in policy substance. The Chinese government described increases in China's confidence and international standing. In addition, it pointed more to deficits in international politics. These descriptions formed the foundation for descriptions of China's

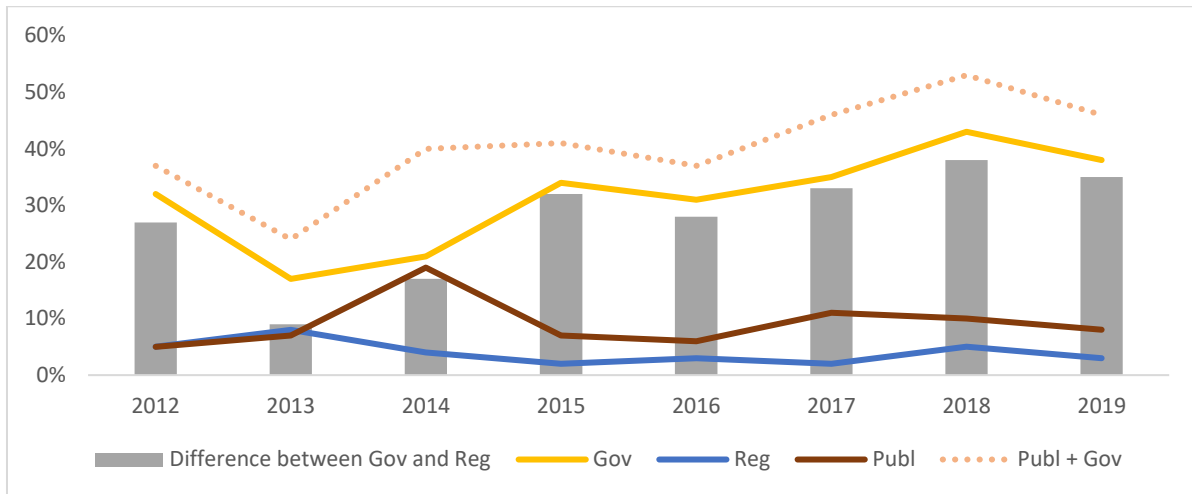
growing ambitions for leadership in international politics. These ambitions relate to the reform of the global (economic) governance system and the provision of international public goods.

5.2 Scholars' constructions of China's national interest

Before gauging the gap between theory, in the context of this project, societal constructions of China's national interest and practice, here, the official construction of China's national interest, it should be examined how Chinese scholars based at universities construct China's national interest. As for the analysis of official Chinese foreign policy statements, I assessed the relative salience of the different components of the construction of the national interest and shifts in policy substance over time (for details, see Chapter 4). Due to important differences between university-based scholars and think tank analysts (for details see Introduction), their influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Consequently, how they construct China's national interest should also be analyzed separately.

In scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates, *lead global governance* became more salient after 2013, while *control the region* became less salient. Overall, the difference in relative salience between the two components of the construction of China's national interest increased significantly over time. In 2018, the difference was most pronounced, but it had already been substantial since 2015. Over time *control the region* became less important. Around 2018 it became slightly more important, but then the relative salience of this component quickly decreased again. *Offer global public goods* was a lot less salient than *lead global governance*. Between 2012 and 2014, the relative salience of *offer global public goods* increased, then it dropped again and remained fairly constant, just above the relative salience of *control the region*. Figure 5.2 provides an overview of these shifts in emphasis in Chinese scholars' constructions of the national interest.

Figure 5.2: Relative salience of selected components of the construction of China's national interest in scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates



Policy shifts that describe the Chinese government as putting forward more encompassing and unique approaches for handling international relations and shifts in which the community of shared future replaces the community of shared interests features most prominently in Chinese scholars' constructions of China's national interest. In addition, shifts in policy substance in which the Chinese government more forcefully explained how international relations should be handled, put forward more specific solutions and proposals, and voiced a more pronounced take on multilateralism also appear frequently in scholarly constructions of China's national interest. In contrast, policy shifts describing how the Chinese government seeks to change the international system and global governance, including global economic governance and internet governance, do not appear in scholars' constructions of China's national interest. Occasionally, shifts in policy substance related to China playing a more prominent role in setting international rules and standards, contributing more to international relations, and pushing more for what it calls democracy in international relations to appear in the analyzed scholarly contributions to foreign policy debates. Policy shifts related to *control the region* infrequently appear in scholars' constructions of China's national interest. Occasionally, the Chinese government's perspective on regional integration is discussed by scholars. Similarly, the Chinese government pushes for cooperation in

regional security, and its take on how Asia should be governed also appears in scholarly discussions at times.

Chinese scholars' discussions about the more encompassing and unique approaches for handling international relations that the Chinese government puts forward focus on implementing the Belt and Road Initiative and the initiative's importance for China's foreign policy. For the most part, Chinese scholars reiterate the founding principles that the Chinese government associates with the Belt and Road Initiative, "discussing, building, sharing together" (共商、共建、共享) (Han, Zhaoying (韩召颖) and Tian, Guangqiang (田光强) 2015; Song, Guoyou (宋国友) 2015). Regarding implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, Liu Jianyong (2015) argues that adjustment in the Chinese government's geopolitical thinking is necessary. Specifically, he calls for developing a "geopolitical concept that is in line with it the "Land and Sea Harmony Theory" (构建与之相适应的地缘政治理念—海陆和合论). Apart from the Chinese government emphasizing maritime security, he argues that the coastal countries along the Belt and Road should build a sustainable security network (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2015c). Another new approach to handling international relations promoted by the Chinese government is expressed in the concept "new type of international relations" (新型国际关系). Guo Shuyong (2019) provides an in-depth description of the concept's intellectual foundations. He argues that the win-win logic of the new international relations not only draws on and transcends the ancient Chinese concept of harmony, the middle ground, and the contemporary win-win theory of the new institutionalism in Europe and the United States but also represents the successful practice of international economic cooperation between emerging and developed countries since the 1970s and 1980s (Guo Shuyong (郭树勇) 2019). While most scholarly contributions engage closely with the official concepts, there are also voices calling for looking beyond them. Liu Changming (2019), for instance, argues that when studying the Chinese government's foreign policy slogans, Chinese scholars "should look beyond the ideas themselves to find issues worth studying in the process of forming and advocating

Chinese diplomatic thought in the new era from a theoretical perspective” (Liu, Changming (刘昌明) and Sun, Tong (孙通) 2019).²⁶

Chinese scholars also discuss what the notions of “Chinese solutions” (中国方案) and “Chinese wisdom” (中国智慧) entail. Wang Yiwei (2017) explains that it is about solving world governance problems (Wang, Yiwei (王义桅) 2017). He describes the Belt and Road Initiative as a contribution to narrowing the development gap and fundamentally solving the root causes of various conflicts and contradictions. According to Wang Yiwei, the Belt and Road Initiative constitutes Chinese wisdom and solution for solving global development problems (Wang, Yiwei (王义桅) 2018c). Men Honghua (2019) describes deepening relationships between China and international organizations. According to him, China is fully engaged in international affairs, actively promoting international cooperation and innovation, and playing an increasingly important role in resolving global affairs and regional issues, with Chinese ideas and solutions attracting worldwide attention (Men, Honghua (门洪华) 2019). Guo Shuyong (2018) argues that Chinese solutions entail the reconfiguration of the world order (Guo Shuyong (郭树勇) 2018). Wang Yiwei (2015) also explains what “Chinese wisdom.” We should contribute more “Chinese wisdom” in connecting with the development strategies of other countries, promoting policy coordination and innovative cooperation mechanisms (Wang, Yiwei (王义桅) 2015). Lastly, Men Honghua (2019) claims that the world pays attention to Chinese ideas, thoughts, wisdom, and solutions (Men, Honghua (门洪华) 2019). According to him, China has grown into a cooperative, responsible, constructive, and predictable shaper of the international system, exerting a significant and even leading influence on international affairs (ibid).

Chinese scholars devote some attention to the Chinese government’s ambitions for setting international rules. Liu Jianyong (2013) discusses international rule-making as a prerequisite for

²⁶ The translations from the Chinese texts that are referred to throughout the empirical chapters were done by the author.

achieving sustainable security. He specifically argues, “a sustainable security strategy requires China to strengthen domestic morality, democracy, and the rule of law while actively participating in international law and international rule-making and improvement (Liu, Jianguyong (刘江永) 2013). Xin Qiang (2014) approaches the issue of international rules from a different angle and accuses other countries of adopting “double standards”. He claims that one could work towards a code of conduct for the South China Sea but sees the United States as requiring China to adhere to these rules while failing to comply itself (Xin 2014). He argues there is nothing wrong with establishing a code of conduct to avoid surprises in the South China Sea dispute, but the point is that the U.S. has already set two “standards” for “international rules” at the same time that China is being asked to comply with the international code of conduct.

There is some discussion about multilateralism in Chinese scholars’ contributions to foreign policy debates. Liu Jianguyong (2011), for example, describes the United States and Japan as pursuing “violent multilateralism” (暴力的多边主义) (Liu, Jianguyong (刘江永) 2011, 2014, 2015a). In contrast, China is called upon to promote “peaceful multilateralism” (Liu, Jianguyong (刘江永) 2015c). More recently, there has been some discussion about multilateralism as a concept. Liu Changming and Sun Tong (2019) argues that “multilateralism has deep cultural roots as the conceptual core of the European view of international order” (Sun, Tong (孙 通) and Liu, Changming (刘昌明) 2019). Zhang Shengjun and Zheng Xiaowen (2019) distinguish issue-based “plurilateralism,” that emphasizes international cooperation among multiple actors, such as governments, interest groups, and NGOs, from “multilateralism” in which sovereign states are the core actors (Zhang, Shengjun (张胜军) and Zheng, Xiaowen (郑晓雯) 2019).

A couple of scholars debate China’s role in regional integration. Most importantly, Wang Yiwei (2018) discusses the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative, highlighting the initiative’s importance for achieving “great economic integration” (经济大融合) (Wang, Yiwei (王义桅) 2018a, 2018c). In 2015, Liu Jianguyong reflects upon how Asia should be governed. Specifically, he

underlines that “Asian countries should strengthen cooperation with other regional countries and relevant organizations, and welcome all parties to play an active and constructive role for Asia’s development and security (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2015c). In another article published that same year, he briefly covers cooperation in regional security by referencing “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia” (“共同、综合、合作、可持续的亚洲安全观”) put forward by Xi Jinping in May 2014.

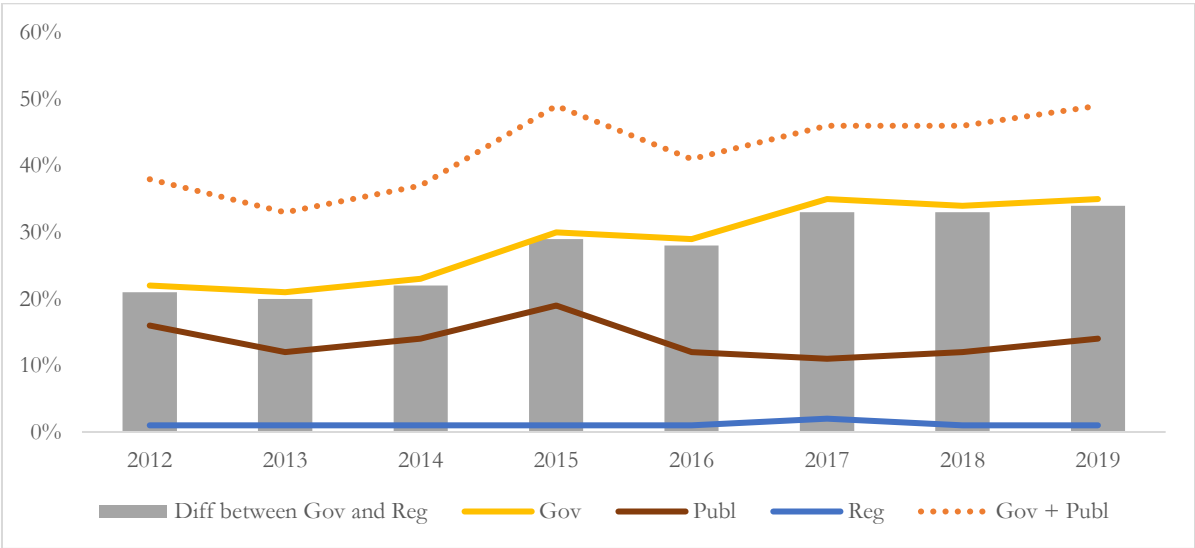
In sum, Chinese scholars’ discussions about more encompassing and unique approaches for handling international relations focus on implementing the Belt and Road Initiative. They further detail what Chinese solutions and wisdom entail, most importantly, suggestions for improving global development and the reconfiguration of the world order. Scholars also discuss international rule-setting and different forms of multilateralism. The little attention devoted to China’s role in regional integration focuses on how Asia should be governed, particularly on questions of regional security.

5.3 Think tank analysts’ constructions of China’s national interest

The following section presents how Chinese think tank experts constructed China’s national interest. In think tank analysts’ constructions of China’s national interest, *lead global governance* became more salient over time. Throughout the study’s time frame, it was the most salient component of the construction of China’s national interest. In contrast, *control the region* played a marginal role, with hardly any changes in its relative salience. With *lead global governance* becoming more important over time and *control the region* staying marginally important, the difference in relative salience between the two components increased over time. If one disentangles *lead global governance* and *offer global public goods* (see discussion in section 5.1), one sees that the former was always more important than the latter. Between 2013 and 2015, *offer global public goods* became more important, then its relative salience decreased significantly, especially in comparison to lead global governance.

Figure 5.3 illustrates these shifts in the components of China’s national interest in think tanks’ contributions to foreign policy debate.

Figure 5.3: Relative salience of selected components of the construction of China’s national interest in think tanks’ contributions to foreign policy debates



In think tanks’ constructions of China’s national interest, policy shifts describing the community of shared future replacing the community of shared interest and the Chinese government putting forward more encompassing and unique approaches for handling international relations featured most prominently. Shifts that described how the Chinese government more forcefully explained how international relations should be handled and that it put forward more specific solutions and proposals also appear prominently. Somewhat frequently surface the Chinese government’s attempts at redefining partnerships in international politics, its stronger role in setting international rules and standards, and its contributions to international politics in think tank publications. Interestingly, references to the Chinese government’s calls for global governance reform are mentioned only twice in think tank contributions. In addition, many policy shifts related to global governance issues, including descriptions of deficits in international politics or ideas for global economic governance, do not appear in think tank contributions. Regarding *control the region*,

the Chinese policy shifts that describe the Chinese government's perspective on regional integration and its attempts at briefly advancing economic cooperation in the region appear most frequently. Its push for cooperation in regional security does not emerge from think tank contributions.

Several think tank analysts attribute “strategic determination” to China, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership. In 2014, an expert at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) argues that since the new leadership had taken office, “strategic determination” (战略定力) and “bottom-line thinking” (底线思维) had come to define China's diplomatic thinking. The expert explains that the former referred to identifying long-term strategic goals and overcoming the temptation to act in the short term while not being consumed by successes and setbacks (Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) 2014). A year later, a report by the same think tank specifies that China's “strategic determination” referred mainly to its domestic and international economic development (Yang, Jiemin (杨洁勉) 2015).

Related to the Chinese government's ambition to redefine partnerships in international politics, “global partnerships” are discussed in several think tank publications. Most importantly, analysts argue that the Chinese government's so-called “new global development partnership” should be linked to similar efforts within the United Nations. In 2013, a SIIS report claims that this would primarily entail establishing an implementation and monitoring mechanism and would help foster China's image as a responsible power willing to provide international public goods (Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) 2013b). Two years later, a report by the same think tank argues that China should link its concept with the one put forward within the UN in order to “make the “new global partnership for development” the dominant discourse to further “justice, equality, and the interests of all humanity” (Ye Jiang (叶江) 2015). Another report points to similarities between the two concepts that should be leveraged (Zhang, Chun (张春) 2015). Apart from that, several think tank contributions survey other countries' global partnerships, for

example, between the U.S. and Japan (Xushi (李秀石) Li 2015), India and Japan, and India and the U.S. (Cao 2015).

Discussions on Chinese solutions and proposals among think tank analysts center around the international community's expectations, the implementation of these solutions and proposals, and their reach. In 2014, a SIIS report claims that "China's voice" (中国声音) and "China's solutions" (中国方案) are increasingly expected and valued by the international community. Given that China played a more prominent role in the world economy and international security affairs, the report sees the international community's demand and expectations increasing (Chen, Dongxiao (陈东晓) 2014). Regarding implementing China's solutions, an 2017 article published by an analyst working at the Guangdong Institute for International Studies (GIIS) article refers to China's unique governance methods, paths in infrastructure construction, and industrialization as key requirements (Wang, Luyao (王璐瑶) and Ge, Shunqi (葛顺奇) 2017). In 2018, another report by the same think tank highlights China's proposals and the contribution of Chinese wisdom and voice in the United Nations, G20, APEC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and other international cooperation venues, all reflecting strong international leadership (周方银 (Zhou Fangyin), 2018). Regarding the reach of China's solutions, areas mentioned by think tank analysts include the governance of the Arctic (Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) 2015), the construction of a new global governance order (Wang, Huiyao (王辉耀) 2017), global investment rules (Wang, Luyao (王璐瑶) and Ge, Shunqi (葛顺奇) 2017), and cyberspace governance (Lu, Chuanying (鲁传颖) 2017). A recent report by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG) also discusses possible obstacles to implementing Chinese solutions. The report argues that many countries perceive the "Chinese solution" as a tool for China's foreign expansion and oppose it (Center for China and Globalization (CCG) 2019).

Contributions by Chinese think tankers also address the question of whether China is fully integrated into the existing international system or whether it should shape new international rules.

A 2013 SIIS report argues that in the second decade of the 21st century, China is no longer an “oppressed” but a “responsible power” in the international system. The report expects it to not only change itself but to shape the world in the future (Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) 2013a). Another report argues that the international system continues to be dominated by Western powers, which demand China become a “stakeholder” and a “responsible power”. According to the report, this shows their clear intention of binding China to the international system (Wang, Falong (王发龙) 2014). Similarly, a 2013 SIIS report claims that the existing international system was still dominated by Western powers, with the vast majority of international rules being expressions of their values and reflecting their interests (L. (宋黎磊) Song and Cai, Liang (蔡亮) 2013).

Chinese think tank analysts debate the potential of economic cooperation in the region. For example, a CIIS report from 2014 discusses the differences in membership in RCEP and TPP and its repercussions for regional economic cooperation (G. (唐国强) Tang and Wang 2014). An expert working at GIIS weighs in on what factors will influence regional economic cooperation arguing that extra-regional powers will likely dominate the future of regional economic cooperation in Asia, most importantly the U.S., instead of regional powers (Li Xiangyang (李向阳) 2014). In addition, some think tank analysts discuss regional security cooperation as well. In 2015, a SIIS report referenced the official Chinese concept of “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable concept of security in Asia” (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2015b).

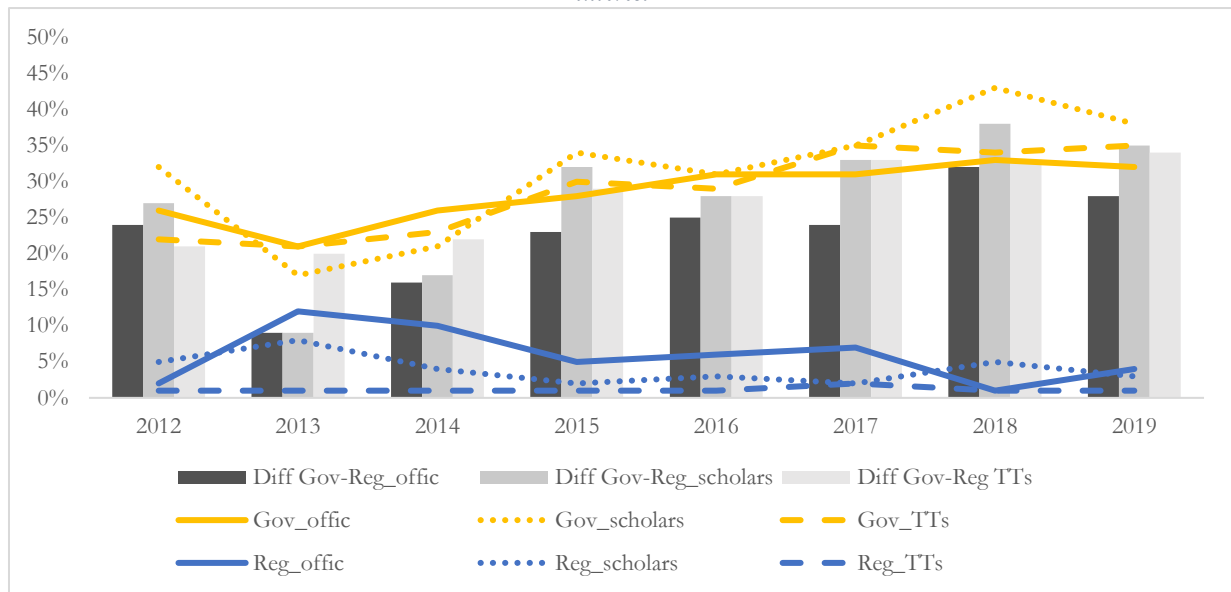
To sum up, the most important shifts in policy substance discussed by Chinese think tank analysts focus on China’s “strategic determination”, the importance of “global partnerships”, and the international community’s expectations for implementing Chinese solutions and proposals. Chinese think tank experts also discussed the extent of China’s integration into the international system and whether it should shape new international rules. Lastly, Chinese think tank analysts give some thought to the potential of economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.

5.4 Comparative analysis of official and societal constructions of China's national interest

There are overlaps and differences in how salient the different components of the construction of China's national interest appear in official foreign policy statements and societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates. Since 2013, *lead global governance* has become more important in all official and societal constructions of China's national interest. In addition, the weight attributed to it is roughly the same. The weight attributed to *control the region* by official and societal actors is also similar. Most importantly, this component became less important across official and societal constructions of China's national interest. The differences in emphasis between *lead global governance* and *control the region* also follow similar developments in the official and societal constructions of China's national interest.

However, there is no perfect match between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest. Upon closer look, subtle differences emerge, as Figure 5.4 illustrates. Between 2013 and 2015, there was less emphasis on *lead global governance* in societal constructions of China's national interest, especially in scholars' constructions, than in the official construction of China's national interest. In contrast, there was much more emphasis in societal contributions on *lead global governance* around 2015 in official foreign policy statements. Another striking difference is that societal actors put less emphasis on *control the region* than the official construction of China's national interest. This is especially the case between 2013 and 2015. Around 2018, think tanks and the official construction of China's national interest paid hardly any attention to this component of the construction of China's national interest. At the same time, however, scholars put more emphasis on it. By 2019, the weight attributed to it in the official construction of China's national interest was the same as in scholars' constructions of the national interest. Lastly, after 2014, the overall difference between *lead global governance* and *control the region* was always more pronounced in the official construction of China's national interest than in societal constructions of China's national interest.

Figure 5.4: Comparisons of the relative salience of selected components of the construction of China's national interest



Overlaps in policy substance between official and societal constructions of the national interest appear regarding changes in the description of China's international standing and regarding the Chinese government's role in world politics. The descriptions of China's increased international standing and increases in China's power to shape and the descriptions of increases in China's confidence in official statements overlap with references to increased strategic determination in think tank contributions to foreign policy debates. In addition, there are overlaps in descriptions of the Chinese government's role in international politics. The description of deficiencies in world politics in official foreign policy statements matches the assertion that the international system remains dominated by Western powers and that China will shape the world in the future.

Regarding *control the region*, there are also some overlaps between the official and societal constructions of the national interest. Think tank analysts, for instance, reiterated the official concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. In addition, there is less emphasis on China's role in the region in official foreign policy documents than descriptions of what other actors should do. This matches the increased focus on how Asia should be governed in scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates.

However, there are striking differences regarding the policy substance of *lead global governance* between official and societal constructions of China's national interest. In official foreign policy statements, growing ambitions for China's leadership role, how the Chinese government will pursue such a leadership role, and Chinese proposals for global governance reform are discussed extensively. These aspects receive far less attention in societal debates. Among scholars and think tankers, more specific solutions, and proposals are discussed extensively. Think tank analysts focus on the international community's expectations, the reach of Chinese solutions, how to implement the concept, and potential obstacles. Scholars specify the purpose of Chinese solutions, especially since they are meant to solve world governance problems and entail the reconfiguration of the world order. China's stronger role in setting international rules is discussed more extensively in scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates, and attempts at redefining international partnerships receive substantial attention in think tank publications. There are important differences between ideas put forward by societal actors and the official construction of China's national interest in these regards. Some scholars even call for looking beyond official concepts when studying Chinese diplomatic thought.

Differences between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest also appear regarding *control the region*. In official foreign policy statements, there is continually less emphasis on regional cooperation. More concretely, this entails fewer references to regional security and less emphasis on China's role than descriptions of what other actors should do. In scholars' contributions, in contrast, the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative for regional integration is highlighted. The emphasis on extra-regional powers, especially the U.S., and the in-depth comparison between RCEP and TPP appear in think tanks' contributions. This is not matched in official statements in which the regional context increasingly faded.

5.5 Conclusions

The preceding analysis showed that official and societal constructions of China's national interest do not match perfectly. Regarding the overall weight attributed to the different components of the construction of China's national interest over time, there are similarities between societal and official constructions of China's national interest. In addition, there are overlaps regarding policy shifts, such as changes in the description of China's international standing and the Chinese government's role in world politics. However, upon closer look, critical differences between official and societal constructions of China's national interest appear regarding the relative salience attributed to the different components of the construction of China's national interest and policy substance. Hence, there is no perfect transmission belt between societal actors' debates and the official construction of China's national interest, which makes considering the intervening effect of domestic structures necessary.

In the following two chapters, I examine the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest. In the next chapter, I provide quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrating under which conditions scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest. Since scholars prioritize research over policy advice and think tanks put policy advice first, and since the state might relate differently to scholars and think tanks, I discuss scholars' and think tank analysts' influence on the official construction of China's national interest separately from each other. Chapter 6 focuses on scholars. Chapter 7 zooms in on think tank analysts. After describing changes in domestic structures and how they affected scholars, I assess how these changes affected the conditions under which Chinese scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest in the next chapter.