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

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## **8 Conclusions**

In discussions about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the oversized table at which Vladimir Putin receives other state leaders and members of the Russian government is commonly interpreted as a symbol of how much he isolated himself from outside input. Similarly, the fact that international observers give at least some credence to rumors that he calls commanders in the field instead of relying on the chain of command underlines how removed this authoritarian leader seems from outside advice (Sabbagh 2022). However, while Vladimir Putin might try to depict himself as unaffected by outside influences, in most authoritarian contexts, there is still at least some degree of societal debate, and under certain conditions, societal actors still influence the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes. In this dissertation, I demonstrated under what conditions this is the case for the PRC under Xi Jinping.

In this chapter, I summarize the study's main findings about the conditions under which Chinese societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest, address the study's limitations, and discuss implications for future research. After discussing insights on societal actors' impact on the foreign policy of authoritarian states, I highlight the importance of domestic structures and tease out differences between Chinese scholars and think tank analysts in the extent to which changes in domestic structures impacted their influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Then, I discuss what these insights mean for understanding China under Xi and other authoritarian states. Before outlining how future research on China and other authoritarian states could build upon the analysis conducted in this project, I address the study's limitations, primarily its focus on foreign policy rhetoric and possible challenges to its premises.

### **8.1 Societal actors' impact on the foreign policy of authoritarian states**

The review of the existing literature in Chapter 2 showed that even under highly centralized authoritarian rule, societal actors could influence the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes. Most

research on societal actors' influence on the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes details the ways in which these actors exert influence and refrain from offering a clear assessment of how much influence they have. Building on these insights about how societal actors influence the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes, this dissertation examined under what conditions Chinese societal actors influenced the official construction of China's national interest. From the assessment of the potential influence of public opinion, NGOs, business interests, and experts, the latter emerged as the most likely group of societal actors to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Hence, this dissertation examined under what conditions Chinese scholars based at universities and Chinese think tank analysts influenced the official construction of China's national interest.

If societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest, there must be substantial overlaps between societal ideas and the official construction of the national interest. To assess such overlaps, I examined patterns in the relative salience of components of the construction of the national interest and the occurrence of policy shifts in official foreign policy statements and societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates. I identified important overlaps in how salient the different components of the construction of China's national interest appeared in official foreign policy statements and societal actors' contributions to foreign policy debates. Based on the conceptualization of the construction of the national interest introduced in Chapter 3, I distinguish the following six components of the construction of China's national interest: *protect China's territory, political system, and citizens, expand China's economic relations, lead global governance, promote China's values, control the region, and offer global public goods.*

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 across official documents and societal contributions. For *control the region*, the weight attributed by official and societal actors is also similar. Besides, the differences in emphasis between *lead global*

*governance* and *control the region* followed similar developments in the official and societal constructions of China's national interest.

However, there was no perfect match between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest. Upon closer look, differences emerged. Between 2013 and 2015, there was less emphasis on *lead global governance* in societal constructions of China's national interest, especially in scholars' contributions, than in the official construction of China's national interest. In contrast, around 2015, there was much more emphasis in societal contributions on *lead global governance* than in official foreign policy statements. After 2017, this trend continued, especially for scholars. Another striking difference was that societal actors put less emphasis on *control the region* than the official construction of China's national interest. This was 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 *control the region*. Around the same time, scholars emphasized it. By 2019, this component of the construction of China's national interest also featured prominently in official foreign policy statements. 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.

Overlaps in policy substance between official and societal constructions of the national interest appeared regarding changes in the description of China's international standing and 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 were overlaps in descriptions of the Chinese government's role in international politics. The description of deficiencies in world politics in official foreign policy statements matched 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 were 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 was less emphasis on China's role in the region in official foreign policy documents than descriptions of what other actors should do. This matched the increased focus on how Asia should be governed in scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates.

However, there were 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 and how to implement these ambitions were discussed extensively, and Chinese proposals for global governance reform also featured prominently. These aspects received far less attention in societal debates. Among scholars and think tankers, more specific solutions and proposals were discussed, for example, how conflicts between neighboring countries could be mitigated. Think tank analysts focused on the international community's expectations, the reach of Chinese solutions and potential obstacles for implementing Chinese solutions. Scholars specified that Chinese solutions were meant to solve world governance problems and claimed that implanting Chinese solutions entailed 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 were other important differences between the official and societal constructions of China's national interest. As detailed in Chapter 6, some scholars even called for looking beyond official concepts when studying Chinese diplomatic thought. Differences between the official construction of China's national interest and societal ideas also appeared regarding *control the region*. In official foreign policy statements, there is continually less emphasis on regional cooperation. More concretely, this entailed fewer references to regional security and less emphasis on China's role than descriptions of what other actors should do. By contrast, scholars' contributions highlighted the significance of the BRI for regional integration. The emphasis on extra-regional powers, especially the U.S., and the in-depth

comparison between RCEP and TPP appeared in think tanks' contributions and are not matched in official statements in which the regional context increasingly faded.

This summary of overlaps and discrepancies between official and societal constructions of China's national interest shows that there is no perfect transmission belt between societal ideas and the official construction of China's national interest. This made it necessary to consider how domestic structures condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest. I argue that societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input determine the conditions under which societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest. When societal actors are close to the state, and when the state is open to their input, they exert the most influence over the official construction of China's national interest. In contrast, when societal actors are distant from the state and when the state is not open to their input, they hardly influence the construction of China's national interest. Societal actors somewhat influence the official construction of China's national interest when they are either close to the state and the state is not open to societal input or when they are distant from the state but the state is open to their input.

## **8.2 The importance of domestic structures**

Societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest. Societal actors' proximity to the state depends on the quantity and quality of formal ties and interactions with state institutions. Formal ties to state institutions provide the setting for institutionalized interactions between societal actors and the state. Societal actors can also interact with state institutions in less structured ways, for instance, through presentations in front of the Chinese leadership and regular interactions with policy-makers at lower levels.

Regarding the second structural variable, the state's openness to societal input, references to the state's responsiveness to society are more common, as detailed in Chapter 3. While the two

concepts overlap, the former is more expansive than the latter. For this project considering the state's openness to societal input was sufficient because the state's openness to societal input affects the political opportunity structures that societal actors face. If one assumes state and society to be interlinked, as the discussion of state-society relations in authoritarian states revealed, the state's openness to societal input is tied to societal actors' ability and willingness to provide such input. In this context, political opportunity structures incentivize societal actors to participate in foreign policy debates and provide societal input that the state can consider. Hence, examining policies towards these groups, their resources, and the broader policy environment, the concept of political opportunity structures helped to uncover how the societal actors perceive their opportunities to exert influence and trace changes in the state's openness to societal input.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I presented quantitative evidence to support the argument that societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input condition societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. For scholars, I documented 36 instances in which scholars influenced policy shifts related to the official construction of China's national interest. All expectations about the conditions under which they influence the official construction of China's national interest deduced from the theoretical argument were fulfilled. When scholars were close to the state and the state was open to their input, they influenced the highest number of policy shifts (67 percent). In contrast, when scholars were distant from the state and when the state was not open to their input, they did not influence any policy shifts. When scholars were close to the state and when the state was not open to their input, they influenced a lot more policy shifts (25 percent) than when scholars were distant from the state and when the state was open to their input (8 percent). For think tank analysts, a slightly different picture emerged. In 85 instances, analysts working at Chinese think tanks influenced policy shifts related to the official construction of China's national interest. Contrary to my expectations, most policy shifts were influenced when the state was open to think tanks' input and when think tanks were distant from the state (35 percent). In line with my expectations, when the state was not open to input

from think tanks and when think tanks were distant from the state, think tank analysts influenced the smallest number of policy shifts (19 percent). This shows that for think tanks close to the state, whether or not the state was open to their input hardly affected their ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest. When the state was open to their input, think tanks close to the state influenced 22 percent of policy shifts, compared to 23 percent when the state was not open to their input.

From the presentation of qualitative evidence for the conditions under which societal actors influenced the official construction of China's national interest in Chapters 6 and 7, a few points are particularly worth reiterating. Scholars substantially influenced the Chinese government's ambitions of taking on a more proactive role in setting international rules and voicing a more pronounced take on multilateralism when they were close to the state and the state was open to their input. When think tanks were close to the state and the state was open to their input, think tank analysts also pushed the Chinese government towards a stronger role in international rule-making. Irrespective of whether the state was open to their input, think tanks distant from the state influenced the policy shift in which the community of shared future replaces the community of shared interest. In addition, when think tanks were distant from the state and the state was open to their input, they influenced the Chinese government's rethinking of international partnerships. When think tanks were close to the state, and the state was not open to their input, experts working at think tanks influenced the policy shift that described the Chinese government as briefly advancing economic cooperation in the region.

### **8.3 Differences between scholars and think tank analysts**

The intervening variables, societal actors' proximity to the state, and the state's openness to societal input affected scholars' and think tankers' influence on the official construction of China's national interest differently. Scholars influenced most policy shifts when they were close to the state and when the state was open to their input. In contrast, think tank analysts influenced the highest



number of policy shifts when they were distant from the state and when the state was open to their input. While scholars still influenced a quarter of policy shifts when they were distant from the state and when the state was open to their input, they hardly influenced any policy shifts anymore when they were distant from the state and when the state was not open to their input. For think tankers', differences between the conditions under which they influenced the official construction of China's national interest were less pronounced. While they influenced most policy shifts when they were distant from the state and when the state was open to their input, the number of policy shifts influenced under the other three conditions was roughly the same.

*Table 8.1: Comparative assessment of scholars' and think tank analysts' influence on the official construction of China's national interest*

		<b>Societal actors' proximity to the state</b>	
		close	distant
<b>The state's openness to societal input</b>	open	<i>In the driver's seat</i>  Most influence expected  Scholars: 67% of policy shifts influenced TTs: 22% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the backseat</i>  Some influence expected  Scholars: 25% of policy shifts influenced TTs: 35% of policy shifts influenced
	closed	<i>In the co-driver's seat</i>  Some influence expected  Scholars: 8% of policy shifts influenced TTs: 23% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the trunk</i>  Least influence expected  Scholars: 0 policy shifts influenced TTs: 19% of policy shifts influenced

In the following, I evaluate the impact of the intervening variable, proximity to the state, on scholars and think tank analysts' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Overall, the intervening variable, proximity to the state, affected scholars much more than think tank analysts. Its effect was particularly pronounced for scholars when the state was open to scholars' input. Here, close scholars influenced 67 percent of policy shifts compared to 25 percent of distant scholars. When the state was not open to societal input, the difference was much smaller:

close scholars influenced 8 percent of policy shifts, and distant scholars did not influence any policy shifts. For think tanks, societal actors' proximity to the state had a bigger impact when the state was open to societal input, but the effect was not as big as for scholars. When the state was open to societal input, distant think tanks influenced 35 percent of policy shifts compared to 22 percent of policy shifts influenced by close think tanks. When the state was not open to societal input, the difference between close and distant think tanks was negligible. Close think tanks influenced 23 percent of policy shifts, and distant think tanks influenced 19 percent of policy shifts.

For scholars, the state's openness to societal input had a much bigger impact than for think tank analysts. The impact of this intervening variable was significantly bigger for scholars close to the state than for scholars distant from the state. Scholars close to the state influenced 67 percent of policy shifts when the state was open to societal input, compared to 8 percent of policy shifts when the state was not open to societal input. Distant scholars influenced 25 percent of policy shifts when the state was open to their input and no policy shifts when the state was not open to their input. Changes in the state's openness affected distant think tanks. When the state was open to societal input, think tank analysts influenced 35 percent of policy shifts compared to 19 percent when the state was not open to their input. For close think tanks, changes in the state's openness to societal input did not impact their influence on the official construction of China's national interest.

Overall, scholars' abilities to influence the official construction of China's national interest were more affected by the change in domestic structures than think tank analysts' abilities. Pinning down exactly why this is the case is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I suspect that it has less to do with the specific properties of the two groups of actors and more with the differences in the nature of the changes in domestic structures examined. To scholars, the state signaled that it was less open to their input. To think tanks, it signaled that it was more open towards their input. Under the CCP's highly centralized authoritarian rule, I suspect closing signals to have a bigger effect on societal actors than opening signals. Societal actors should be highly

attuned to the state's efforts to curb their space for expression. In contrast, even when the state signals more openness towards societal input, I expect societal actors to remain skeptical about the state's intentions. This could explain why the state's increased openness towards think tanks had a less pronounced effect on their ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest.

#### **8.4 Implications for understanding China under Xi Jinping**

By integrating insights from the authoritarian politics literature and scholarship about China's political system into the study of China's foreign policy, I showed that ties between the party-state and society are multifaceted and that under certain conditions, societal actors can still influence China's foreign policy 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 by acknowledging the importance of societal actors' proximity to the state and changes in the state's openness to societal input. For assessing proximity to the state, I showed that whether an actor can be considered distant from or close to the state depends on several institutional factors, including formal ties to party-state institutions, membership in advisory groups, success in obtaining research funding provided by the government, governmental recognition, for example, through awards by the government and direct interactions with the CCP leadership or policy-makers. To examine the state's openness to societal input, one needs to trace changes in domestic structures and their effects on the political opportunity structures that societal actors face. In this dissertation, I demonstrated that the state's openness to societal input shifts over time depending on changes in domestic structures. I further showed that the state's openness can differ depending on the group of actors, here scholars at Chinese universities and analysts working at Chinese think tanks.

These insights on changes in the state's openness to societal input have implications for research on how the Chinese government mitigates the "dictator's dilemma" introduced in Chapter

3. The “dictator’s dilemma” describes that authoritarian rulers must walk a fine line between allowing societal debates where citizens can voice their true opinions and controlling the resulting tensions to avoid authoritarian collapse. Most importantly, I showed that the state’s openness to societal input can vary between groups of societal actors and that it can change over time. While changes that unfold over longer time periods or leadership generations have well been established in the existing literature, I demonstrated that such changes also occur in a shorter period, for example, in the fairly short time frame examined in this project. Since 2015, the Chinese state’s openness to societal input from think tanks has increased, whereas its openness to input from scholars has decreased since 2016. With regards to the scholarship focusing on the dictator’s dilemma, this dissertation contributes the insight that the regime can adapt its strategies to consider societal input. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the time-boundedness of one’s assumptions about how the regime considers societal input. In addition, it is critical to specify whose input is under consideration. While this dissertation focused only on university scholars and think tank analysts, the fact that differences appeared already between these two comparatively similar groups lets one assume that there are even more pronounced differences in the state’s openness to societal input between other societal actors, such as business interests, NGOs, or the general public.

In contrast to work emphasizing the shrinking space for societal debate in China, my research uncovered that Chinese societal actors still influence China’s foreign policy despite the increasing centralization of political power. These findings have two important implications for other governments’ policies toward China. While it is important to acknowledge severe restrictions on societal actors and their debates on foreign policy in the PRC, it is also critical to see that there is still limited room for societal actors to debate and influence foreign policy. As a result, engagement with these societal actors is still possible and necessary. Policy-makers should still try to listen to these voices, possibly through the help of scholars and think tank analysts in their countries, who should continue to engage in conversations with their Chinese counterparts. At the same time, this dissertation showed that it is important to pay close attention to changes in

domestic structures and to assess how changes in political structures affect the political opportunity structures that Chinese societal actors face. Such close assessments help determine which societal actors might influence China's foreign policy at certain times instead of making broad-sweeping statements about their lack of involvement.

### **8.5 Relevance for understanding other authoritarian states**

An in-depth assessment of the scope conditions is critical to assessing how relevant the study's findings are for understanding other authoritarian states. Key factors shaping the scope conditions in the Chinese context under study are the degree of centralization of political power, state-society relations, and an observable change in foreign policy. Similar to the PRC under Xi, Turkey under Erdogan and Russia under Putin exhibit tendencies towards strongman authoritarian rule, a crackdown on civil society, and growing geopolitical ambitions. Hence, I expect my findings on the conditions under which societal actors can influence the official constructions of their countries' respective national interest, to apply to these contexts as well. Further research should examine whether this is the case.

Even if the dissertation's findings were not to be generalized, the study would still provide important insights for studying societal actors' foreign policy debates in other settings. The dissertation showed that societal actors' proximity to the state and the state's openness to societal input shape the conditions under which societal actors can influence foreign policy. The operationalization of these concepts could be easily adapted to the particularities of other authoritarian regimes. In addition, by accounting for societal actors' proximity to the state, this dissertation offered a way to account for the fact that under authoritarian rule, societal actors are not completely independent from the state. This is an important contribution to any study about societal debates about foreign policy, not only for research that tries to assess societal actors' influence on foreign policy.

## 8.6 Limitations of the analysis

As a “hard case in a data-poor environment”<sup>30</sup>, this study suffers from several methodological and empirical limitations. Most importantly, it focuses on the rhetorical level of China’s foreign policy and draws only on written sources. Apart from the fact that drawing definite causal links is difficult in the context of the project, there are also instances in which societal actors did not influence the official construction of China’s national interest. In addition, political change in China, either threatening the stability of authoritarian rule or doing away with societal debate, could hurt the study’s premises.

Focusing on the official construction of China’s national interest, the study focuses solely on the rhetorical level of China’s foreign policy. While there are not only pragmatic but also conceptual reasons for this focus, as discussed in the Introduction, there are still the following draw-backs: First, given the secrecy associated with authoritarian rule due to the lack of checks and balances (Barros 2016), there might be big differences between what is publicly communicated and what is discussed behind closed doors. Second, observations of China’s foreign policy hint at potential differences between the official portrayal of China’s national interest and how the government pursues it. Most recently, Nathan and Zhang (2022), for instance, argued that “Chinese foreign policy behavior often diverges from the face meaning of its rhetoric [...]” (2022, 58). China’s approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea is a prominent example of these differences. In its rhetoric, the Chinese government emphasizes that disputes should be settled through mutual respect and negotiations. In practice, however, it does not acknowledge the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling and continues building large, militarily fortified artificial islands to stake its claims (ibid, p. 70). This dissertation can neither account for such gaps between China’s foreign policy rhetoric and behavior nor can it make claims about societal actors’ influence on China’s

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<sup>30</sup> My supervisor, Daniel Thomas, described my dissertation in that way a while ago. The image helped me a lot to situate the study in its scholarly context.

foreign policy behavior. Section 8.7 will discuss what this means for future research on China's foreign policy.

Due to severe restrictions imposed on foreign researchers in response to the Covid-19 pandemic when research for this dissertation was conducted, the study is only based on written sources and informal conversations with Chinese researchers. It is important to note that scholars working on Chinese politics felt and discussed the increased difficulty in gaining access to Chinese interview partners or the country as such, even before the pandemic (Barris et al. 2021; Greitens and Truex 2020). Challenges for researchers include concerns for their safety and the safety of their interview subjects, potential interviewees' reluctance to talk to researchers, and the danger of obtaining incorrect information (Sharma 2021). Hence, it is safe to say that all similar current research on China's foreign policy suffers from these limitations. However, even though there are good reasons to focus on written sources, as explained in Chapter 4, the study would certainly have benefited from a triangulation of its results with data gathered through interviews with Chinese scholars and think tank analysts.

As discussed in Chapter 4, pinning down societal actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest is analytically challenging. To address problems with causal identification, this project drew on "preference attainment theory" (Dür 2008) and the "text-reuse approach" (Christensen 2023) and combined the frequentist understanding of causality underpinning these approaches with a careful consideration of the context in which societal actors influence the official construction of China's national interest. I focused on instances in which Chinese societal actors influenced the official construction of China's national interest. However, there are also instances in which Chinese societal actors did not exert influence. When considering all policy shifts identified in official foreign policy statements, it becomes apparent that many of these shifts were not influenced by the societal actors whose influence I examined. To be more specific, for *lead global governance* and *control the region*, only around a quarter of the ideal-type policy shifts identified in official foreign policy statements were influenced by scholars and think tank

analysts (see a detailed overview of ideal-type policy shifts identified in official foreign policy statements in the appendix). In some instances, policy shifts first appeared in official foreign policy statements and then in societal actors' contributions suggesting that the government might have influenced societal actors. This observation opens up new avenues for research. Applying the same methodology, one could examine how the government influences societal foreign policy debates.

Several policy shifts traced in official foreign policy statements did not appear in societal actors' contributions. Policy shifts describing the Chinese government's ambitions of making international affairs more equitable and inclusive, including the pushes for what it calls "democracy in international relations", did not appear in societal actors' contributions. Similarly, the Chinese government's efforts at redefining the use of platforms and other cooperation mechanisms and its more specific solutions and proposals do not appear in societal contributions. Apart from this, policy shifts related to specific policy areas, including the fight against climate change, the reform of global (economic) governance, proposals for changes in the international order and system, internet governance, UN reform, WTO reform or the BRI do not appear in societal actors' contributions. Regarding China's role in the region, several policy shifts did not appear in societal actors' contributions. This includes the shifts where the Chinese government describes itself as more involved in regional cooperation or voices how Asia should be governed more forcefully and offers more to the region. Moreover, societal actors do not mention the policy shift that identifies an increasing number of challenges in the region. The fact that there are many instances in which societal actors did not exert influence fits the common expectation that societal actors cannot influence foreign policy under highly centralized authoritarian rule. However, this makes the finding that, in some instances, scholars and think tank analysts did influence policy shifts even more noteworthy and highlights that under certain conditions, Chinese societal actors can still influence the official construction of China's national interest.

The second set of limitations relates to the study's premises. Political change in the PRC, either threatening the regime's stability or doing away with societal debate entirely, could hurt the



study's premises. The starting point of this study was the observation that the CCP's General Secretary and China's State President, Xi Jinping, had centralized political rule more than his predecessors. At the time of writing, shortly after the CCP's 20th Party Congress in October 2022, Xi Jinping had centralized political rule in such a way that observers started to question the stability of his and, as a result, the CCP's rule over the long term (Blanchette 2022; Johnson 2022; Tsang and Cheung 2021; Xia 2022). However, while such discussions have yet to leave the realm of speculation, if Xi Jinping's and the CCP's rule faltered, one of the dissertation's key premises would no longer apply. The other premise this dissertation was built on is that there is still some societal debate about foreign policy. While this was still the case for the time frame under study, increasing totalitarian tendencies such as all-encompassing surveillance could stifle such debate (Chin and Lin 2022; Kang 2022). This would eliminate the second key premise this dissertation was based on.

## 8.7 Future research

In this final section, I discuss how future inquiries about China and other authoritarian states could build upon the analysis and findings of this dissertation. Most immediately, the substance of the different components of the official construction of the national interest could be an additional intervening variable to be considered. More generally, future research on Chinese societal actors' influence on China's foreign policy could expand this dissertation's sole focus on foreign policy rhetoric in two different ways. It could move beyond foreign policy rhetoric to cover foreign policy behavior and explore scholars' and think tankers' motivations for influencing foreign policy.

In this dissertation, I understand the official construction of China's national interest to be made up of six components, *defend China's territory, political system, and citizens, expand China's economic relations, lead global governance, offer global public goods, promote China's values, and control the region*. Future research could examine whether and in what ways the substance of these components of the national interest could be an additional intervening variable that conditions societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. For instance, Chinese societal

actors could exert more influence on the expansion of China's economic relations than on issues related to the defense of its territory because, under the CCP's rule, more debate is permitted on economic issues than national security.

Now that I could establish that Chinese scholars and think tank experts can influence the official construction of China's national interest, their influence on foreign policy should be examined in more detail. Future research should examine whether societal actors' influence is limited to foreign policy rhetoric or extends to foreign policy behavior. To do so, I suggest assessing the gap between China's foreign policy rhetoric and behavior across policy issues. In cases where the gap between foreign policy rhetoric and behavior is marginal, the insights from this study on societal actors' influence on the official construction of China's national interest can easily be transferred. Only when there is a significant gap between foreign policy rhetoric and behavior would one need to develop new approaches for assessing societal actors' influence.

In this dissertation, Chinese scholars and think tank analysts were represented by their contributions to foreign policy debates. Since certain limitations come with only considering what they are putting out, especially in an authoritarian system where censorship and self-censorship are rampant, future research should center on societal actors. One could assess their motivations to influence China's foreign policy through interviews. Differences in think tankers' and scholars' motivations and the incentive structures provided through their forms of employment could also provide details regarding the conditions under which they influence the official construction of China's national interest.

Based on a careful examination of scope conditions, findings from this dissertation can be generalized and applied to other authoritarian regimes. Key factors shaping the scope conditions in the Chinese context under study are the degree of centralization of political power, state-society relations, and an observable change in foreign policy. Similar to the PRC under Xi, Turkey under Erdogan and Russia under Putin exhibit tendencies towards strongman authoritarian rule, a crackdown on civil society, and growing geopolitical ambitions. Hence, I expect my findings on

the conditions under which societal actors can influence the construction of their countries' national interest, to apply to these contexts as well. 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. Nevertheless, I was able to show under what conditions Chinese scholars and think tank analysts can still influence the official construction of China's national interest. I expect similar research to be feasible in other authoritarian contexts. But as my research showed, analyzing societal actors' contributions to official constructions of the national interest is done best in light of shifts in the state's openness to societal input and societal actors' proximity to the state.