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The written evidence to The International Relations and Defence Committee in response to the Inquiry: The UK's security and trade relationship with China

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Subject: The China's approach to the international world order

A prerequisite for understanding the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is to realise that this is the foreign policy of the China Communist Party (CCP). At first glance such a statement seems to be a question of semantics, but in fact it has profound practical consequences: the interests of the Chinese state or the Chinese people do not always coincide with the interests of the Communist Party and its elites. In the event of a contradiction between them, the interests of the Party will prevail.

It is also of practical importance for external observers. Attempts to analyse the PRC's foreign policy through the prism of its national interest often leads to inaccurate predictions, because they project onto the PRC the Western understanding of the state's interest, assuming the existence of an objective interest detached from the calculations of specific interest groups. In the PRC, however, foreign and domestic policy is determined solely and exclusively by the interests of the Party and its elite. Last one is already largely hereditary, which also has consequences.

The Western perception of China

There are two ways of looking at China: *projection* or *orientalism*. The first approach is that Chinese policy is guided by the same paradigms as in the West, so the Party decision-makers will be able to see the logic behind international institutions, a law-based order, or the mutual benefits of cooperation. They will see that China is the beneficiary of a liberal international order. The second recognises China as a civilisation radically different from the European one. It assumes that China is governed by its own laws and rationality, with a profuse reference to Confucianism.

The Party decision-makers are aware of both these approaches and are perfectly able to use them against the Western partners. To the supporters of the former they will argue: *China needs time, that concessions are necessary, so that the Party hardliners do not stop reforms*. In the second case, they will say: *China and democracy, human rights, or the rule of law are incompatible, and that some form of authoritarianism is natural in China*. If one adds to this post-colonial guilt in the West, one gets a powerful tool of manipulation in the hands of Chinese diplomats.

The CCP on the international stage

In order to understand the PRC's perspective on the existing international order, it is necessary to understand how the Party sees itself in the present international order and what role it foresees for the state it has created. This complex subject can be broken down into five working questions: (1) What is the CCP and what is its vision of international relations? (2) How does the CCP understand politics, including foreign policy? (3) What strategic goals does the CCP have? (4) What intermediate goals does the CCP have? (5) What tools does the CCP use in international politics?

1. What is the CCP and what is its vision of international relations?

The CCP is an outsider. The CCP considers itself an outsider in the existing international system. The Party is well aware that both itself and the state it has created are incompatible with the existing international order. This is because there are still many characteristics of the national liberation movement in the CCP's thinking about the world.

- The most important element in building the identity of the CCP is **nationalism**. It is strongly marked with **anti-colonial** and **anti-Western** accents. Consequently, the Party elites do not trust the West and will never trust it. They believe that The West will always strive to maintain China's subordinate role in the world and its inferior place in the economic order.
- The PRC is a **Leninist state**, but Marxism-Leninism no longer sets its utopian goal - world revolution. The communist ideology, however, still fulfils three important functions: (1) it provides the Party apparatus with a conceptual framework - even if the leaders do not believe in Marxist ideology, they still look at the world through the prism of Marxist analysis or socio-political concepts; (2) Marxism is an alternative to the Western path of modernisation; (3) the ideology is a tool for managing and mobilising the extensive party-state apparatus, therefore it is an indispensable element of the regime.

The above characteristics mean that even if the PRC is a beneficiary of the existing liberal international order and globalisation, the CCP by its nature remains a revisionist organisation, suspicious of the outside world and antagonistic towards the West.

2. How does the CCP understand politics, including foreign policy?

It is easiest to characterize the CCP's approach to politics as holistic or total. Consequently, from the point of view of the Party elite, there are no objects or aspects of social, economic, or cultural life that are not political, also in the international sphere. In short, **everything is politics**.

The Party also rejects the concept of the compartmentalization of international relations, popular in in some Western countries, according to which relations between international entities can be divided into various sectors, such as trade, investment, technological or scientific cooperation, cultural exchange, security issues, climate, etc. and then international actors can conduct negotiations in

one sector separately from the rest. It is a rationalist approach, drawing on the idea of the Enlightenment. However, for the Communist Party, everything comes together, and it sees no reason to not to use its advantage in one segment to counterbalance its weakness in another. It can even be seen that **the Party considers the concept of compartmentalization as a weakness that can be and should be exploited.**

From the point of view of the communist Party, nothing can be left out of control. **Everything must be controlled.** This is the only way to gain a political advantage, also on the international stage. According to the Party, politics is a game of power, and violence, including economic coercion, remains its primary source and ultimate means of defence. For the Party, **domestic and foreign policy are two fronts of the same struggle.**

The Party's actions are guided by three simple principles: (1) always keep pushing forward and never back down, unless there is a strong resistance and a serious cost; (2) eliminate all potential threats as soon as they are identified, even if it comes at some cost; (3) there are no limits to the growth or expansion of the sphere of influence, both domestically and internationally. Any self-limitation is temporary and dictated by momentary circumstances. The current situation in Hong Kong provides a good example of the practical application of these principles.

3. What strategic goals does the CCP have?

The power is a family business

'With the generational shift in the Chinese elite during the 1980s and 1990s, the descendants of those Party veterans have started to be included in key political positions, as they were seen as guarantors of the specific project of the CCP and its state. At that time an unwritten rule was adopted that each Party clan could only appoint one person to Party work within a given generation. Other family members, who often built up vast business empires, became the economic backbone for the family. In this way, a new caste of 'princelings' developed, who came to dominate Chinese political and economic life from the 1990s. As a result, membership of the Party's highest elites is gradually becoming hereditary, and the Party factions are also more often the result of alliances between individual Party clans. [...] Today, many of the ties within the elite result both from their life in isolation, and from arranged marriages. However, it does also happen that talented and ambitious cadres with no political base marry into the Party elite. The highest-ranking figures in the hierarchy at present who 'married into the Party' are Premier Li Keqiang and Wang Qishan, Vice-Chairman of the PRC. The wife of the current Premier, Cheng Hong, is the daughter of Cheng Jinrui, an activist of the CCP and the Communist Youth League and the head of the Council to Combat Poverty in the 1980s, who was a close associate of Deng Xiaoping. In turn, Wang Qishan's father-in-law is Yao Yilin, first Vice-Premier in 1988-93.'ⁱ

The CCP has only one primary goal: **the survival of the regime.** The entire

domestic and foreign policy of the PRC is subordinated to this one goal. Especially that the fate and success of individual Party clans is increasingly connected with the fate of the regime.

This goal is achieved through two basic measures: eliminating any threats and gaining the support. Party politics focuses on balancing between those two extremes. Too much internal repression or too aggressive foreign policy will mean a loss of support, whether at home or among the international community. However, tolerating domestic opposition or international criticism is a weakness in the eyes of the CCP's elite. Therefore, the tendency to repression at home and aggressive propaganda attacks abroad usually prevails.

An economic incentive is an important means of gaining support at home and internationally. This is a typical **carrot and stick strategy**. The Party believes that just as it binds the Chinese together by controlling their access to the benefits of economic growth, it can also bind economic partners to the CCP's global agenda. Therefore, the PRC sees foreign investment, access to the Chinese market, and export control of strategic products as a potential weapon in the international competition.

Another important element in gaining an internal or international legitimacy is the myth of the meritocratic foundations of the CCP's rule.

The myth of meritocracy

The powerful myth of China's meritocracy draws upon the tradition of the mandarin exams in China's imperial period. Today, the CCP is trying to reinforce their social legitimacy by building an image of a meritocratic institution. It argues that strict rules of promotion ensure that the PRC is being governed by the best representatives of any given generation. The Party cadres' actions and achievements are indeed of importance, but in practice the advances within the hierarchy are often the result of personal manoeuvres, and represent the creation of political bases by local Party 'barons' and the main political circles in the CCP's Central Committee. Transition to a higher level comes from strengthening one's political position in Beijing, the power of one's own political base, and successes in effectively managing the jurisdictions subordinate to oneself (which since 1978 has usually equated to achieving high local GDP growth) and preventing social unrest.ⁱⁱ

4. What intermediate goals does the CCP have?

One can identify six medium-term goals that the CCP wants to pursue internationally. They all have one thing in common: they increase the regime's chances of survival both internally and externally.

- **Creation of the Chinese international sub-system.** Despite the whole propaganda narrative of superpower, the Party elite realises that as an outsider it has limited possibilities of influencing the structure and form of the existing international order. The PRC also does not have the necessary knowledge, capabilities, and resources to effectively play the role of a superpower. In fact, the CCP seeks to create its own, limited in size international sub-system, made up of economically dependent developing countries. This logic is consistent with the double-circulation strategy adopted

in the 14th Five-Year Plan. According to its assumptions, the PRC will strive to build independent supply chains inside the country, but at the same time it will create a network of international ties that will support internal circulation.

- **Push out the US from East Asia.** The CCP realises that it will not be able to create a security buffer in East Asia without forcing the US out of the region and neutralising its allies, especially Japan. Taiwan plays a key role here. A swift capture of the island that the US could not prevent, can make the PRC a real regional power in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the collapse of democratic Taiwan would have a decisive impact on the prestige of the US in the world. The landing on the island, however, is a high-risk operation. Its failure would have serious internal consequences, so the Party elite will not make this decision easily.
- **Technological and economic independence.** The condition for protecting against any foreign pressure on the regime is to achieve technological and economic independence. Because in recent years the sources of obtaining new technologies from abroad have been severely limited, Chinese intelligence and research centres currently focus abroad on acquiring data on basic research and their adaptation for the needs of the country's industry. Some industrial sectors, especially semiconductors, must be built virtually from scratch.
- **Ideological and cultural self-isolation.** The CCP's greatest concern is the impact of Western political ideas and concepts on the Chinese society. As a result, the CCP's elite strive for ideological and cultural self-isolation of the PRC. This goes beyond the Internet censorship or mass media control. The communist Party wants to make it as difficult as possible for foreign ideas to penetrate China. These plans include, for example, the proposition to abolishing the obligation to learn English at school. The self-isolation is to be accompanied by 'the radiance' on the outside world. The CCP aims to promote Chinese culture and the Mandarin language to the world. It is supposed to be an element of Chinese soft-power building.
- **Promotion of the 'Chinese Model'.** The CCP realises that it has created a unique model of government in China that is impossible to adapt in other countries. Nevertheless, for several years there have been attempts to promote the 'Chinese model' abroad. In fact, the CCP is interested in promoting to the world simply the authoritarian rule as such. In the opinion of the CCP elite, the emergence of a kind of the authoritarian international will be beneficial for the PRC. Its aim is to limit the concepts of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the world, which it considers a threat. At the same time, a growing number of authoritarian states will be portrayed in propaganda as imitating China. This is one of the CCP's ways of gaining an internal legitimacy.
- **Elimination of political competition and ideological threat in the form of democracy.** The CCP, like any authoritarian regime, fears the existence of an alternative concept of government in the form of democracy. From the point of view of the CCP's elite, the mere existence of any form of government other than authoritarian somewhere in the world will always be

an existential threat to CCP's rule. Therefore, the CCP will use all means at its disposal to discredit, ridicule, and weaken the Western democracies.

5. What tools does the CCP use in international politics?

Since, in the CCP's perspective, internal and international issues are very closely related, it uses similar tools on both fronts. Often, political activities at home and abroad are closely related. There are also several features that are characteristic of the CCP in its actions.

- The CCP accepts the unpredictability of socio-political, economic, and international reality. Therefore, the Party elites consider it most important to maintain the ability to adapt quickly, change concepts and reevaluate existing assumptions.
- One of the hallmarks of the CCP is a management through mass campaigns, also internationally. The phenomenon of the so-called 'Wolf warrior diplomacy' can be explained as a Mao's style political campaign. Contrary to appearances, it is not only aimed at audiences in China, but is also a demonstration towards the international public opinion.
- The CCP creates politics through experimentation. Projects on the international stage such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are experiments which, according to the principle of continuous adaptation, do not have a single goal, but are constantly transformed in line with the changing international situation.
- For the CCP, practice is paramount. 'Learning' is done through 'doing'. A general course of action is set, but an overly detailed plan is avoided. The base is the improvisation, adaptation and, above all, effectiveness.
- The use of controlled populism at home and abroad is the basis of the mass influence of the CCP. In recent years, the Party, learning from the Russian experience, has been using more and more boldly disinformation measures directed at the societies of the Western countries.
- The basis of effective propaganda is the control of the media and social communication. While this is easy to achieve in China, thanks to censorship and state control of the mass media, the CCP's narrative meets the resistance internationally. Nevertheless, the PRC tries to appear in the international information space. It promotes foreign-language channels of state-owned media. It tries to influence the narratives in foreign media through advertising campaigns of Chinese companies. It gains control over the media directed to the Chinese diaspora in the hope that some overseas Chinese will influence public opinion in the country of residence. There are also attempts by Chinese companies to acquire either the publishers or the advertising companies. The greatest emphasis is placed on influencing societies in developing countries, but more and more efforts are made to influence public discourse in the Western countries.
- Despite actively influencing public opinion, the Party understands that there are some limitations to its power of manipulation. Therefore, it recognises the

existence of a certain autonomy of public opinion that must be reckoned with. For example, the nationalism that the CCP uses to gain an internal legitimacy also influences the expectations of Chinese public opinion. As a result, it affects the international activity of the PRC. In short, the Party became a hostage to its own nationalist narrative.

- Since the Party treats Marxism-Leninism in an instrumental manner, it can use the structures of the Leninist state for non-communist goals in nature or vice-versa. Therefore, there is no contradiction in using free market mechanisms to increase the efficiency of state-owned enterprises or in using state-owned enterprises to invest abroad and gain technology or influence.

How to counteract?

In the media one can often find sensational analyses describing the China's great strategy. In fact, the CCP has only one general goal and a few indirect subsidiary goals. It also uses a set of simple tools and principles, but these give the CCP great flexibility and adaptability. The CCP shows steadfast consistency, patience, cleverness, creativity, ruthlessness, and a great deal of sheer impudence when using them. At the same time, the CCP has at its disposal human and material resources of China. If one adds to this a deep conviction about the Darwinian nature of international relations and a revisionist attitude to the existing order, one gets a dangerous opponent.

This is clearly seen in the BRI. Since its announcement, the West has been trying to work out a strategic response. The problem is that the CCP has changed the concept of BRI several times in the meantime, and when the West finally creates a strategy, this one will no longer be relevant. The problem lies in trying to create a strategy in response to an initiative that has no hard strategic goals, but is an ever-evolving tactic, a practice of action. The over-intellectualisation and over-analysis are a common problem in the Western approach to the CCP. This is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of the CCP, which is a selfish Hobbesian entity with an interest only in the survival, not in the realisation of some abstract concepts.

Another problem is the assumption that the CCP can be persuaded to change its approach, that the CCP can reform and adapt to the Western view of international relations. From the CCP's point of view, the Western idea that international competition can be formalised and that there are sectors that constitute the common goods is absurd. As an outsider, the CCP sees an advantage for others to obey the rules as it circumvents and bends them. So far, there is no reflection in the CCP that this will lead to the collapse of the international system and the adaptation of equally brutal rules of the game by other entities, and ultimately it will not be beneficial to the PRC.

An effective Western policy towards the CCP would require a serious intellectual and tactical reevaluation. First, rejection of the policy of engagement and the belief that the PRC can be changed through the trade and involvement in multilateral structures. It is also necessary to start generating true political and economic costs for the PRC for violating human rights and international obligations. All this, however, requires a willingness to bear the costs of the new policy. In a situation when several Western countries are still stuck in the

paradigm of policy of engagement, the growing economic crisis related to the pandemic, and structural tensions in the transatlantic cooperation, the prospects for developing a common and coherent policy towards the PRC are decreasing. The CCP also uses a mixture of economic incentives and punishments towards some Western partners to prevent the emergence of a common Western strategy towards the PRC.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ Michał Bogusz, Jakub Jakóbowski, [*The Chinese Communist Party and its state*](#)

[*Xi Jinping's conservative turn*](#), OSW 2019, pp. 25-26.

ⁱⁱ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.

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