



## CHINA'S FOREIGN BEHAVIOR WARRANTS SUSTAINED US COUNTERMEASURES

BY ROBERT SUTTER

*Robert Sutter ([sutterr@gwu.edu](mailto:sutterr@gwu.edu)) is Professor Practice of International Affairs at George Washington University, USA. This assessment draws from the major revision of his assessment of Chinese foreign policy in *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force: Fifth Edition* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2021).*

Americans are nearing the end of the most divisive election year in living memory. China is the main [foreign policy issue](#) in the 2020 campaign, with continuing strong debate going forward. [Advocates](#) of hard countermeasures toward China say previous US administrations' failure to counter Chinese challenges resulted in China now posing an enormous danger to American interests. [Critics](#) play down past failures and dangers posed by China, condemn excesses in the recent US hard line, and favor a more [moderate](#) and nuanced approach.

Which approach is better? Comprehensive evidence-based assessment finds the United States, its allies, and its partners are fundamentally challenged by wide-ranging and intensifying Chinese efforts to weaken America in headlong pursuit of ever-expanding Chinese ambitions. Sustained US measures are needed to counter Chinese challenges seen in every major area of Chinese foreign policy behavior, as indicated by the examples below.

### China-Russia Entente

China's partnership with Russia has [significantly strengthened](#), with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping supporting forward momentum. These powers pose increasingly serious

challenges to the US-supported order in their respective priority spheres of concern—Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in Asia. China [backs](#) Russia in carrying out military exercises to intimidate countries in Europe and the Middle East and in efforts to divide NATO and the European Union. Russia backs China in carrying out [exercises](#) supporting Beijing's expansionism in the South China Sea, Chinese pressure [tactics](#) to weaken US alliances with South Korea and Japan, and efforts to [undercut](#) US-led sanctions against North Korea.

### Exploitative Economic Practices

China's three-decade long [efforts](#) using state-directed development polices to plunder foreign intellectual property rights and undermine international competitors have had profound negative impacts on US and Western interests. Beijing does so with hidden and overt state-directed economic coercion, egregious government subsidies, import protection, and export promotion using highly protected and state-supported products to weaken and often destroy foreign competition in key industries. The profits go into efforts to achieve dominance in major world industries and build military power to secure China's primacy in Asia and world leadership. They allow companies like Huawei to attempt to dominate international communications enterprises. The profits also support massive state-directed Chinese efforts to lead high technology industries that will define economic and military leadership in world affairs. Beijing disguises these practices with avowed support for globalization. China increasingly gains international legitimacy for its predatory economic practices from the UN Secretary General and other world leaders.

### Building and Exploiting Economic Dependence

China disregards globalization in leveraging economic dependence to compel states to defer to Chinese demands. Many countries rely heavily on exports to and/or imports from China, and many states depend on the inflow of Chinese tourists and students to their countries. Coercion is applied or threatened by the Chinese government directly or through party channels mobilizing boycotts, demonstrations, and other pressures in China against foreign targets.

Recent examples involve Argentina, [Australia](#), [Canada](#), France, [Germany](#), Great Britain, Japan, [New Zealand](#), [Norway](#), the Philippines, [South Korea](#), Sweden, Taiwan, and the United States.

As a creditor, China [undermines](#) World Bank, IMF, and OECD lending guidelines. So-called debt traps often involve large amounts of Chinese debt accumulated by short sighted, selfish, and corrupt foreign leaders; their successors find that easing the debt burden is impossible without China's close cooperation because of the high costs of canceling the projects financed and often built by China. China sometimes compels these states to accommodate Chinese demands for equity (e.g., land, ports, and airfields) for repayment and/or Chinese requests for access to military facilities or other favors.

#### Fostering Corrupt and/or Authoritarian Governments Against the West

China's Belt and Road Initiative and other programs rely on bilateral nontransparent deals involving extensive Chinese financing. They are attractive to many [foreign corrupt and/or authoritarian leaders](#) adverse to existing international lending norms. The agreements deepen Chinese influence while serving the power and personal wants of the authoritarian and/or corrupt foreign leaders. This symbiosis represents a strong asset in China's growing international influence as the world is full of such regimes.

Chinese provision of communications and surveillance systems assist authoritarian foreign leaders to track and suppress opponents. Robust Chinese interchange with media outlets in various states promotes news coverage that is positive concerning the government leadership and China. Chinese communications and surveillance systems along with Chinese provided hydro-electric dams, railroads, and port operations cause recipient countries to rely ever more on Chinese firms for maintenance; and they make the Chinese ties difficult and expensive to replace by another provider. Communications and surveillance systems also assist Chinese intelligence collection and manipulation of opinion in the country.

Salient examples of authoritarian and/or corrupt foreign governments influenced in these ways include [Venezuela](#) and Ecuador in Latin America; [Serbia](#), Montenegro, and at times arguably Italy and Greece in Europe; Djibouti and [Zambia](#) in Africa; the Maldives and [Sri Lanka](#) in South Asia; and [Cambodia](#), Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Several authoritarian governments in the Middle East and Central Asia work closely with China along these lines.

#### Coercing Neighbors, Leveraging Unconventional Assets

Chinese forces' repeatedly confront and sometimes combat without the use of firearms Indian forces along the disputed boundary. Chinese Maritime Militia and Coast Guard vessels [intimidate](#) governments challenging China claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. China privately warns disputants that countering China on these matters will lead to their decisive military defeat. Backing the warnings are major shows of force by Chinese naval and air forces in the South and East China Sea and [around Taiwan](#). Beijing bombers last year teamed up with Russian bombers to probe and challenge the air space of US allies South Korea and Japan.

Among unconventional means of leverage, Chinese dams [controlling the flow](#) of water in the Mekong River influence downriver countries Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Beijing's [strong ties](#) with armed separatist groups inside Myanmar provide a major source of influence on Myanmar.

#### Influence Operations

Well-funded Chinese agents and front organizations have significant success in 1) mobilizing the Chinese Diaspora, 2) winning over foreign dignitaries to work in support of Chinese objectives, and 3) influencing media and journalism in a number of states. They are backed by diplomats abroad prepared to resort to invective and threats in demanding deference to China's objectives supported by the influence operations. Related are strong efforts to penetrate foreign high technology centers for desired information through the Chinese government's

thousand talents program and IPR theft. Chinese agents actively recruit foreigners for espionage.

#### Disregard for International Law

China rejects the July 2016 ruling of an UNCLOS tribunal finding against China's expansive South China Sea claims. It uses [illegal abduction](#) of and prolonged detention of Chinese residents abroad and holding foreign citizenship, ignoring provisions of international conventions. Beijing arrests and detains foreigners as leverage against their governments.

#### Undermining ASEAN, European Unity

China works steadily to weaken the unity of ASEAN and of the European Union. It appeals to some members at the expense of the unity of the group, which otherwise would impede Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia and Europe.

#### Conclusion

In sum, Chinese foreign policy efforts, if successful, will undermine and overshadow the existing world order with one dominated by an authoritarian party-state focused on advancing Chinese wealth and power at the expense of others. America faces many important challenges in the coming years—countermeasures against those coming from China should remain strong.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.*