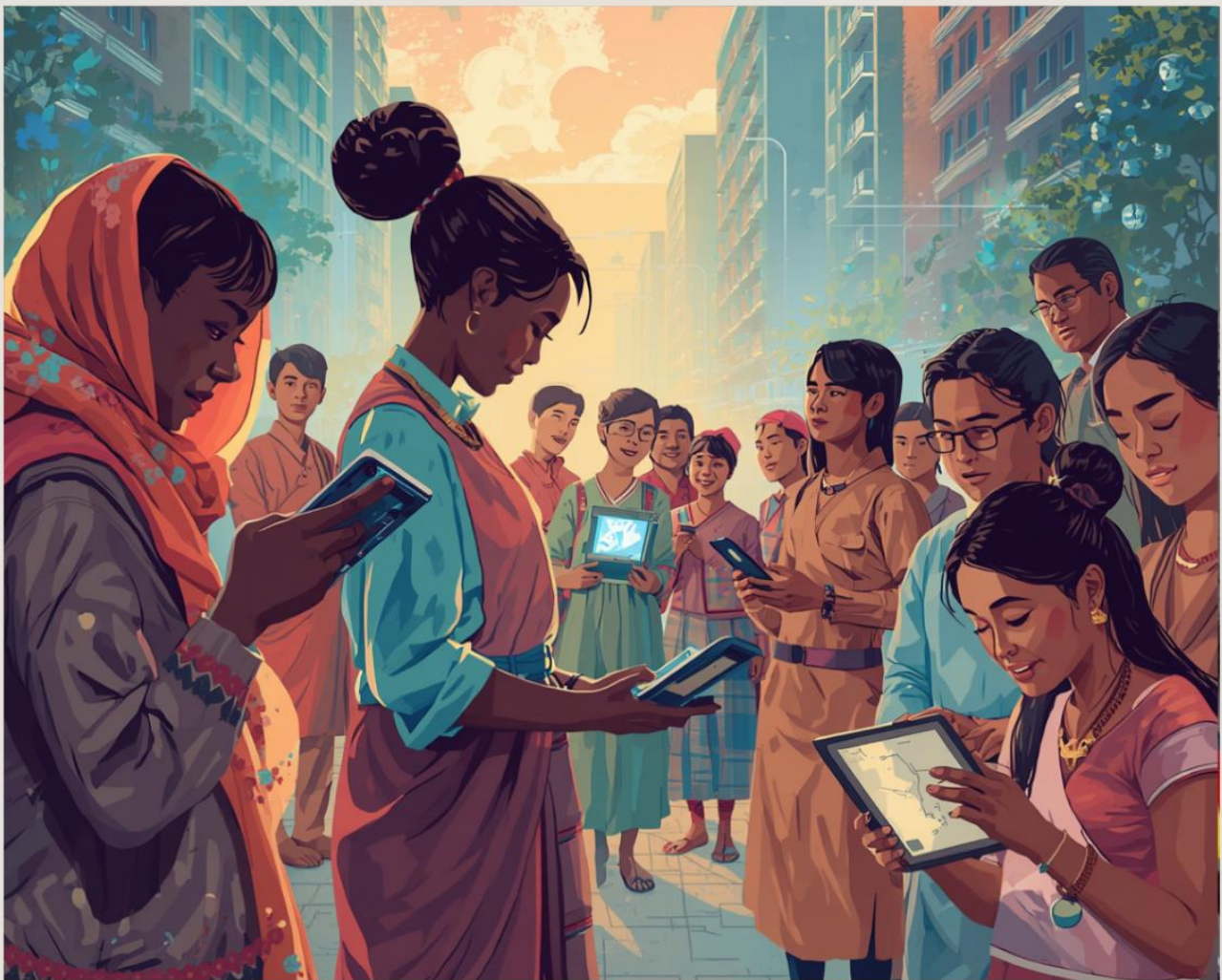


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PROMOTING GLOCAL PEACE AND SECURITY

HORIZON INSIGHTS



Culture's Role in
Navigating
Technological Change

Beyond Central Asia: The
ever-expanding influence
of the Shanghai
Cooperation Organization

PLA in the Arctic:
under the ice?

Book Review: Suisheng Zhao,
The Dragon Roars Back:
Transformational Leaders
and Dynamics of Chinese
Foreign Policy.

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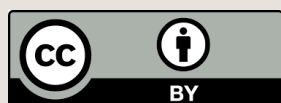
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By Saban Yuksel

Foreword

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to present this new issue of Horizon Insights, which brings together analyses on technology, culture, institutional transformation, and the shifting landscape of global security.

This edition opens with a timely reflection on the cultural dimensions of technological change. As artificial intelligence and big data become increasingly embedded in democratic life, the article argues that culture cannot remain a secondary concern in technology governance. It must be understood as a central dimension of risk, resilience, civic participation, and collective sense-making.

The second contribution turns to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its expanding role beyond Central Asia. By examining the SCO's growing reach into South Asia, the Middle East, and beyond, the article shows how the organization has become part of a broader institutional architecture through which China and Russia seek to manage relations, build influence, and offer alternatives to Western-led frameworks.

The third article shifts attention to the Arctic, where China's military, commercial, and scientific activities are becoming increasingly interconnected. Its analysis of PLA capabilities, Sino-Russian cooperation, dual-use infrastructure, and the Northern Sea Route highlights the Arctic as an emerging arena of strategic competition with direct implications for Europe and the wider international order.

Finally, this issue concludes with a review of Suisheng Zhao's *The Dragon Roars Back*, which revisits the role of leadership, ideology, nationalism, and institutional control in shaping Chinese foreign policy from Mao to Xi Jinping.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue ask how power is organized, legitimized, and projected through technologies, institutions, strategic spaces, and political leadership. We hope this edition encourages critical reflection on the forces shaping democratic resilience and international order in an increasingly contested world.

We wish you a thought-provoking and enlightening read.

Sincerely yours,

Beyond the Horizon ISSG

Culture's Role in Navigating Technological Change¹

By Artur Osipov²; Eleonora Lima³; Emma Clarke⁴; Furkan Akar⁵; Gianluca Savini⁶; Jennifer Edmond⁷; Joanne Ahern⁸

Abstract:

The policy brief published by KT4D suggests that examining culture allows for a deeper understanding of societal responses to AI development. Rather than applying only the current proposed risk assessment framework which greatly underestimates the cultural and societal impacts of AI technologies, KT4D argues that the appearance of culture within the regulatory frameworks must be refined, clarified and strengthened, a process to which the mechanisms outlined in the policy brief could contribute. Indeed, a culture-centric approach highlights the diverse and complex ways in which communities navigate technological advancements. This approach acknowledges that new media are embedded within ongoing processes of meaning negotiation. As technology continues to evolve rapidly, democratic processes and civic engagement face mounting challenges. It is imperative for policymakers to protect the cultural dimension from potential AI harms, fostering a harmonious relationship between technological advancements and democratic principles. The authors argue that by prioritising cultural preservation alongside technological regulation, policymakers can develop more effective and equitable policies. This not only aligns with ethical considerations but also harnesses the invaluable insights offered by cultural responses to AI development.

Keywords:

Knowledge Technologies · Civic participation · AI integration · AI governance

¹ The policy brief was originally [published](#) by the KT4D (Knowledge Technologies for Democracy) project under the Horizon Europe framework

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| 1 Introduction

Examining culture allows us to discern existing strengths and resistance patterns rather than solely fixating on risks. Societies and their inhabitants possess agency in navigating AI advancement, or any novel technology, by relying on collective and personal cultural approaches to adapt to these transformations. However, it can be tempting to think of technology choices, in particular in relation to the new but opaque developments driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data, as disconnected individual or institutional decisions. As a society we have often become accustomed to viewing technologies as products we buy (even when they are free of cost), rather than doors into complex ecosystems of data collection and processing that have an impact far beyond our personal view of system function. While this framing has proven effective for driving technology innovation and adoption, it obscures the wider communal impact of these systems, and the manner in which our individual decisions affect our perceptions, and ultimately the lives, of those others with whom we are interdependent, sharing our communities and natural resources.

The rapid progress of technology is in this way surpassing the capacity of individuals, societies, and democracies to assimilate them. The resulting damage to collective sense-making occurs largely on the level of culture, the mostly tacit, but vital, web of values, practices, beliefs and norms that underpin stable and productive individual and shared identities. Due to this incursion into cultural sensemaking not just by technologies, but by the corporate interests that profit from them, democratic processes and civic engagement have come increasingly under threat as these technologies seamlessly integrate into our daily lives, families, and social networks, bringing with them filter bubbles, disinformation and polarisation.

Culture may be more varied and sensitive than critical systems that are more visible (such as water mains or medical records), yet it still merits and requires protection from threats such as hacking or manipulation. Protecting the cultural dimension from potential AI harms will require a proactive policy approach that not only addresses the evolving landscape of technology, but also seeks to foster a harmonious relationship between technological advancements and the preservation of democratic principles and civic participation. Adopting a culture-centric approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of societal responses to AI development, moving beyond the narrow focus on risks advocated by the AI Act. As Lisa Gitelman writes: “new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning”

(2006:6). These cultural responses must be acknowledged, supported, and protected by policymakers in their regulatory effort, not just because this is the ethical thing to do, but also because they are invaluable tools in developing effective and fair regulations. This policy brief, created by the Knowledge Technologies for Democracy (KT4D) project, illustrates some of the current gaps in the policy landscape with regards to technology and cultural risk, and suggests some preliminary measures to be taken to address them.

1.1 The KT4D Project

The Knowledge Technologies for Democracy (KT4D) project offers a distinctive approach to the growing tensions between AI and big data technologies, and democratic processes. We do this by placing cultural values and identity formation at the heart of our understanding. The project recognises that AI and Big Data have become fundamentally interwoven into our societies, our culture/s and indeed into our expectations and conceptions of democratic governance and exchange. However, they can also contribute to an environment for citizens that is distinctly anti-democratic. KT4D harnesses the benefits of a conceptualisation of these as - Knowledge Technologies - changing not just how we access goods and services, but how we know the world and ourselves to foster more inclusive civic participation according to democratic principles. Our work is underpinned by the understanding that to fully address the costs to social and fundamental rights of AI and big data, we need more than just technological fixes: we need to address the underlying cultural influences and barriers. We do this through an integrated set of activities developing tools, guidelines, and a Digital Democracy Lab Demonstrator platform, with our specifications and results being validated across three user needs scenarios in four European cities. KT4D contributes to a revitalised vision of technology development and adoption in Europe. Under this new model, KT4D will be able to capitalise on the many benefits advanced knowledge technologies can bring in terms of community empowerment, social integration, individual agency, and trust in both institutions and technological instruments, while confidently mitigating potential ethical, legal and cultural risks.

The insights that follow arise from the project's first year of work, which has featured both fundamental research and the first meeting of our four Use Case meetings in Brussels, Madrid, Warsaw, and Dublin. These sessions brought together citizens, policymakers, and technology developers, devising a multi-perspective dialogue on the repercussions of knowledge technologies such as AI on democracy and civic engagement, laying the groundwork for the further exploration and development of practical, culturally aware, and ethical AI tools.

| 2 KT4D Perspective on Recent Development

2.1 Recent European Regulatory Developments

The European Union has been leading the way in the regulation of knowledge technologies through its regulatory initiatives, including the Digital Market Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act). From the point of view of cultural and collective identities, there are at least two significant and potentially problematic gaps left open in this framework, namely the lack of consideration given to culture generally, and the absence of recognition of cultural risk factors specifically. Each of these will need to be addressed if the AI Act, DMA and DSA are not to accelerate, rather than ameliorate, processes of polarisation, division, and disinformation that are already threatening our democracies from the cultural foundations upward.

2.2 Cultural Blindspots in the Current Regulatory Discourse



The AI Act establishes a risk-based classification, dividing the use of AI into the categories of “unacceptable, high, and limited or minimal risks,” however the content of these categories deserves further scrutiny.

While the AI Act does not mention ‘culture’ or ‘identity’ explicitly, it does express the importance of protecting individuals from cognitive behavioural manipulation. KT4D contends that even with these protections in place, self-interested coercion by anti-democratic forces is still granted a free hand to manipulate wider cultural trends by filtering and gating public discourse and cultural participation.

Furthermore, the weak discourse on values within the regulations similarly open them up to a focus on economic and technical possibilities, rather than social and cultural optimals. Culture, its specificities and variances, as well as its ability to unite and divide, is, after all, implicit in many of the key terms central to the policy discussions surrounding AI and big data. Whenever it does mention values, the language of the AI Act speaks only of undefined ‘Union values’ which could seem to include universal values and human rights, rather than wider European cultural values.

Concepts of trust, trustworthiness and responsibility are culturally determined, as is our understanding of the limits of personal freedoms, and the line between the private and public spheres. The few implicit definitions of culture and values that can be distilled from the AI Act are not encouraging in this context. For example, there seems to be a conflation of values as a reflection of culture, and ethics. Ethics is a part of culture, but by no means all of it. Similarly, cultural diversity is invoked as a specific desirable when it comes to hiring decisions within software development teams. Such a narrow view of the role of culture can misrepresent its pervasive quality, however, and imply that hiring policies can automatically make software align with human-centric values. The cultural positioning of the users of a technology, and the manner in which this shapes their perceptions and actions, are not taken into consideration.

| 3 The Concept of Cultural Risk

The AI Act establishes a risk-based classification, dividing the use of AI into the categories of “unacceptable, high, and limited or minimal risks,” as per the graphic in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Risk Assessment Hierarchy

This risk assessment framework greatly underestimates the cultural and societal impacts of AI technologies. Application areas such as recommender systems transcend both the commercial sphere and the realm of individual consumer choice, influencing cultural participation, perceptions of shared values and community identities, and controlling

access to knowledge on online platforms. *As such, in their current forms, they shape individual cognition and collective sense-making significantly. Another example is video games, a sector that is deemed as low risk, but in which AI integration can introduce opaque decision-making that can shape young minds without clear accountability.*

3.1 Why might cultural risk be underestimated?

Culture is a challenging concept to work with as its role and impact, while pervasive, is subtle and differentiated between regions, languages, communities, and indeed individuals. On complex issues, not everyone will agree on a single ‘correct’ culturally aligned position or definition: *this diversity is one of Europe’s greatest strengths, but it is also a constant reminder not to conclude too quickly about the universality of certain culturally loaded assumptions.*

Culture also frustrates some of technology development’s vested interests, however. Evgeny Mozorov has warned us of the dangers of ‘technosolutionism’ by which we seek to solve problems wrought by technology with more technology. The arrogance that leads certain powerful interests to adhere to this notion also brings us the apparent fallacy that we should not hinder innovation for fear of social costs. The truism states that “The US innovates, China imitates, and Europe hesitates,” but what is the evidence that questioning the value of technological development in this way does not in fact lead to new and better innovation paradigms? We know from Facebook’s so-called ‘emotional contagion’ experiment that companies give little heed to the care that should be taken when intervening in the self-determination and autonomy of users.

This situation is reminiscent of the pharma industry in the 1960s, when a few prominent whistleblowers were able to bring about massive changes in the regulation of an ethically unacceptable regime of human subject research. It cannot be said that this has in any way harmed or destroyed the pharma industry. In fact, one can make the counter argument that a socio-cultural awareness in fact has created new business models and innovation opportunities that balance off the power-monopolies of the dominating Big Tech companies.

KT4D user group meetings have shown that while software developers are becoming more comfortable with the language of intersectionality, other aspects of culture (such as varying national and regional value alignments) remain outside of the frame of consideration when bringing software systems online. Culture and the identities that emerge from it continue to be understood as individual traits, not relational or communal ones.

| 4 Future Steps and Recommendations

Europe is a world-leader in regulating AI - but we can do more. The appearance of culture within the regulatory frameworks must be refined, clarified and strengthened, a process to which the following mechanisms could contribute.

4.1 Incorporate culture into the concept of risk

As discussed above, the current conceptualisation of risk that has pervaded EU technology regulation encourages us to consider tangible, economic and infrastructural risks, but not the systemic changes being enacted upon the manner in which people think, feel, relate and participate. From a cultural perspective, we therefore propose the creation of a second, inverted form of the current risk pyramid, which would highlight more subtle but equally significant cultural impacts.

“ Embracing the inverted pyramid model resonates with the KT4D project’s emphasis on integrating cultural perspectives into AI policy, highlighting the imperative of integrating cultural identity, values, and civic engagement into AI governance.

Adopting the inverted pyramid model aligns with the KT4D project’s focus on integrating culture-led perspectives in AI policy, and underscores the necessity of incorporating cultural identity, values, and civic engagement into AI governance, promoting policies that reflect and respect cultural diversity.

The model suggests that safety issues in AI should extend beyond immediate physical risks to consider

long-term societal norms for interaction. It recognises that *AI impacts knowledge dissemination and identity formation, which are pivotal to democratic processes*. Thus, the inverted pyramid framework not only assesses technical risks but also serves as a structure for a democratic, culturally informed approach to AI policy.

Adopting the inverted pyramid model aligns with the KT4D Policy Brief’s focus on culture-led perspectives in AI policy. It calls for a revision of the risk-based approach to include a culturally contextual assessment of AI technologies.

This model champions a participatory policy development process, ensuring diverse cultural inputs are considered. It underscores the necessity of incorporating cultural identity, values, and civic engagement into AI governance, promoting policies that reflect and respect cultural diversity.

Recognizing AI's long-term societal impacts on knowledge dissemination and identity formation, the inverted pyramid framework extends beyond technical risks, fostering a democratic, culturally informed approach to AI policy. Regulators are urged to consider AI's integration into the cultural fabric, ensuring policies encompass both societal influences and safety concerns.

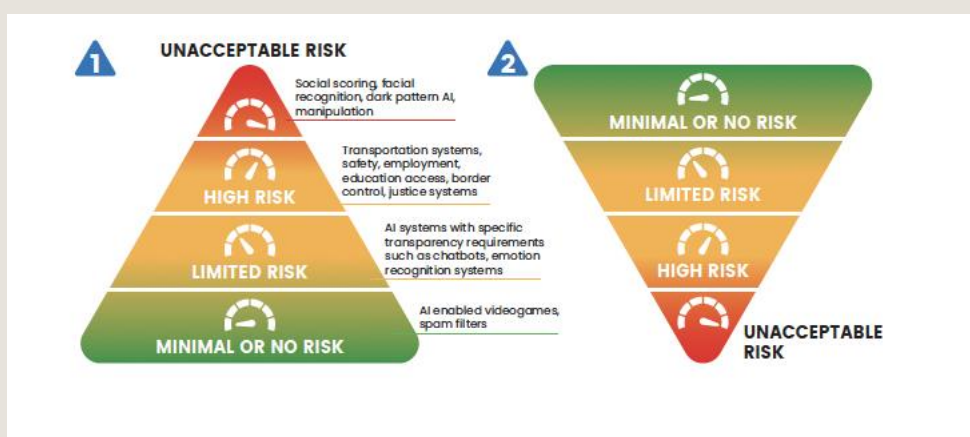


Figure 2: The Inverted Risk Pyramid

4.2 Foster collective thinking in policy and personal decision-making

4.2.1 Civic participation in AI policy development

If individuals continue to be encouraged to see only the solitary benefits and disbenefits of their technology adoption, the cultural frame of consideration will continue to be minimised, even when we may know that these platforms do not necessarily have the best interests of our children, our neighbours, or our colleagues at their heart. Encouragement to take into account wider aspects of eg. sustainability, community goods, personal agency and self-determination, values alignment, intergenerational solidarity etc. requires a wider consideration of one's identity and place in the social ecosystem. Such *a paradigm shift will be able to encourage critical digital literacy and critical thinking, but also support community bonds and rebuild trust in expertise through new approaches to policy development.* Although this mechanism must be deployed with care, as of course echo chambers are themselves a manifestation of a skewed collective sense-making, collective approaches - be they citizen assemblies, wide consultations, town halls, etc. - toward decision-making that supports wider interests can be a powerful tool.

4.2.2 Education

Education must also play a part in this shift. Teaching young people to code is not enough, we need to be teaching all people to be critical about technology choices and to consider their cultural and civic participation alongside their consumption decisions. This will require sensitivity, however: when looking at the many tools currently available and tasked with improving AI literacy and supporting ethical approaches to AI development and implementation, the vast majority is available only in the English language. This developmental bias overlooks not only the many Europeans who do not speak English, but also the manner in which culture and language can also be drivers for trust and engagement.

4.2.3 Computer science and software development

In addition, *the general lack of attention to ethics, not to mention culture, in computer science and software development* should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Simply adding a few additional modules to existing training programmes will not enact this shift: *the culture of coding itself has a strong set of values, processes, and norms which do not align very comfortably with wider considerations of the diversity and needs of their users*. In addition, many creators of software code are now coming out of self-taught or non-holistic training programmes. The lack of widespread regimes of accreditation for software development is a gap here, as is the way in which many software developers wouldn't necessarily know exactly what weaknesses might lie in code they have borrowed. The EU's pioneering "ethics by design" approach represents a positive step forward. Unlike traditional approaches that often treat ethics in development as a mere checklist or compliance exercise, ethics by design aims for a more comprehensive and holistic integration of ethical considerations.

15 Conclusion and Next Steps

Contrary to the AI Act's emphasis on risk assessment, surveys indicate that public concerns and acceptance of AI vary across applications and contexts, such as the impact on jobs, cultural heritage, and political opinions. Qualitative research becomes crucial for understanding trade-offs between benefits and concerns. Initiatives like the KT4D project facilitate this by analysing how citizens' and developers' concerns align or deviate from policy-level questions, emphasising the need for a cultural perspective.



AI impacts knowledge dissemination and identity formation, which are pivotal to democratic processes.

“Looking at culture can give us a sense of what strengths and patterns of resistance are in place, instead of only focusing on risks. Societies and their citizens are not powerless in the face of AI development – or of any new technology – but they rely on shared and individual cultural strategies to respond to these changes.”

The KT4D project is committed to contributing to this shift in practice, encouraging the move toward a more culturally aligned perception of human-centred AI, in particular as pertains to cul-

tural and civic participation. We look forward to receiving feedback related to this policy brief from policymakers, citizens and industry leaders as to how this might be delivered.

Beyond Central Asia: the ever-expanding influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization⁹

By Jeremy Garlick¹⁰

Key takeaways:

- *The SCO is expanding beyond its Central Asian heartland southwards and westwards across Asia, reaching the Middle East and North Africa. As a “talking shop”, it has achieved relatively peaceful and cooperative relations between its ever-expanding club of members.*
- *In 2024, Turkey, a NATO member, applied for membership of the SCO, indicating a probable shift by President Erdogan away from a frustrated bid for EU membership to closer ties with China and Russia.*
- *SCO dialogue partners include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. This suggests that these oil- and gas-producing Middle Eastern states are interested in enhancing ties with China and Russia rather than being reliant on political and economic ties with the US and the EU.*
- *The SCO should be seen as a sister organization of BRICS, enhancing Chinese and Russian influence in the global South, with a particular focus on Asia and the Middle East. As such, it should be taken seriously as a counter to the influence of legacy organisations of the US-led “liberal international order” such as the G7 and NATO.*

Keywords:

Belt and Road Initiative · Liberal International Order · Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) · BRICS · China · Russia · Central Asia

⁹ This policy paper was [originally published](#) by the *European Hub for Contemporary China*” (EuroHub4Sino) project under the Horizon Europe framework and is republished under the Creative Commons CC BY license.

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| Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is well known among foreign policy analysts as a platform for China-Russia cooperation in Central Asia. With roots in the post-Cold War era and a precursor called the [Shanghai Five](#) dating from 1996, the SCO served initially to boost Sino-Russian cooperation while dampening down possible regional tensions. The role of the SCO included the aim of building understandings which would transcend ongoing [territorial disputes](#) between the Central Asian states which had emerged as national entities from the ashes of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Reclusive [Turkmenistan](#) is not a member but attends summits as a guest.

In 2017, the SCO expanded its sphere of influence into South Asia with the [addition](#) of India and Pakistan. [Iran joined](#) in 2023 and [Belarus](#) in 2024. This gave the SCO not only new footholds in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, but also meant that the organisation contained nations with around [80 per cent](#) of the Eurasian landmass, 43 per cent of the world's population and a quarter of global GDP.

Apart from its ten members, the influence of the SCO extends further. A number of states from the global South have the status of either observers or dialogue partners. The two observers are [Mongolia](#) and Afghanistan. The dialogue partners include all the major Persian Gulf fossil fuel exporters: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. The other dialogue partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the Maldives, Nepal, and Turkey. So the SCO has a considerable impact given that leaders from all these economically developing countries can personally attend summits at which Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are the central figures. It also seems intended to expand to include more nations. This stands in marked contrast to the G7, which is a club with fixed membership for developed nations only: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US, plus the EU as a [“non-enumerated member.”](#) While the G7 pointedly excludes global South nations, the SCO seeks to bring them into the fold.

It is surprising, then, that the SCO is not much acknowledged in the Western public sphere. It is more-or-less unknown to the general public in Europe and North America. As an organisation which is obviously a framework for the spread of Chinese and Russian influence through Asia, but also towards other parts of the global South such as the Middle East and Africa, the SCO is clearly a key part of a conscious attempt to construct an [alternative](#) to the US-led so-called liberal international order ([LIO](#)). The LIO is represented by institutions such as the G7, NATO and the

International Monetary Fund (IMF). The SCO, alongside the better-known BRICS platform and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is an attempt to construct an alternative set of institutions and arrangements through which to establish, maintain and extend Sino-Russian influence southwards and westwards across the Eurasian landmass. [The constant addition](#) of new members, observers and [dialogue partners](#) from South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa attests to this.

| 1 The SCO as a cooperation facilitation mechanism

Some observers claim that the [SCO](#) lacks a clear purpose, leading to the accusation that it is [“ineffective and irrelevant”](#). For instance, is it intended to promote security cooperation or economic integration between the member states? In fact, as with most Chinese-led institutions and initiatives, the SCO has a multi-purpose function. Even against the backdrop of its institutionalised structure, its remit is loose and vague enough to allow evolution over time rather than having a single fixed aim. The SCO’s fairly broad remit arguably allows for flexibility and dynamism instead of it being a static framework which is not able to change as circumstances demand.

Within its remit, the SCO includes the [promotion of cooperation](#) on security, economic and political issues within an expansive envelope for policy discussion and formation. It is intended to smooth the way towards increased collaboration and reduced conflict between its members. The aim is to strengthen interstate ties by persuading members that working together is more profitable than arguing over issues such as disputed borders. The SCO is a multilateral platform upon which the members can build consensus and group together in a new framework outside the Western-dominated LIO.

Although not at first sight obvious because they mostly refer to an absence of events rather than occurrences, there are three clear examples of what the SCO has achieved. First, the mechanism has smoothed out potential troubles in relations between China and Russia in Central Asia. The states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were all part of the former Soviet Union. As such, they can be seen as part of the Russian rather than Chinese sphere of influence. Thus, it might have been expected that increasing Chinese investments in the region would have generated tensions with Russia since they would be seen as competition for influence and resources. Yet even as bilateral trade between China and Central Asia has increased exponentially in the

21st century, rising from [US\\$1.5 billion](#) in the year 2000 to [US\\$94.8 billion](#) in 2024, no such [tensions](#) have arisen.

“
The SCO's main achievement thus far is to have offered its members a cooperative forum to balance their conflicting interests and to ease bilateral tensions.

This negative outcome – an absence of conflict – supplies evidence that discussions between the leading members of the framework have averted possible misunderstandings by easing Russian fears about a potential Chinese takeover. Russian and Chinese perspectives on the region are certainly not identical: China's involvement in Central Asia leans towards [economics](#), while Russia focuses above all on [geopolitics](#) and security. Be this as it may, the two sides have managed to find ways to overcome their differences and promote “[win-win](#)” outcomes.

As a European Parliamentary [briefing](#) puts it, “The SCO's main achievement thus far is to have offered its members a cooperative forum to balance their conflicting interests and to ease bilateral tensions.”

The second achievement is that relations between the Central Asian states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union have been somewhat fraught since they obtained independence. Borders have been continuously disputed, with armed clashes between border guards breaking out on a number of occasions. For instance, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have [exclaves](#) inside each other's territory. But, presumably partly due to regular discussions at the SCO under Chinese and Russian guidance, minor clashes have never escalated into larger conflicts. The SCO has played at least a contributory role in easing tensions between the Central Asian states.

Third, and most important from China's point of view, bringing the Central Asian leaders onside has reduced the risk of Uyghur separatist movements gaining traction in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Since 2014, when [separatist violence](#) appeared to be increasing amid attacks on Han Chinese by members of the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), the Chinese government has [cracked down](#). And a major part of China's intensified security efforts has been focused on ensuring that ETIM and other separatist factions lack support from the territory of Xinjiang's Western neighbours. Due to discussions at the leadership level, China has been able to secure its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

[Chinese troops](#) have even been deployed inside its neighbours' borders without creating much rancour or drawing much attention.

Of course, the addition of India and Pakistan intensifies the security headaches facing SCO leaders, leading some to opine that admitting the nuclear arch-rivals was a [mistake](#) on China's part. Nevertheless, seeking to overcome entrenched territorial disputes and security issues through diplomatic means adheres to the core goals of the organisation – and to China's long-term goal of establishing a global [Pax Sinica](#). This effort at "[harmonisation](#)" is to be based on the spread of purportedly benevolent Chinese influence outwards from its Chinese core, through Central Asia, and then southwards and westwards across the global South.

| 2 Complex interdependence: economics and institutions

Of course, beyond security goals there is the aim of enhancing economic cooperation between the member states. In particular, from China's point of view, Central Asian resources such as oil and natural gas are crucial for China's continued rise. Oil and gas [pipelines](#) constructed over the last two

decades snake their way from [Turkmenistan](#) across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan through Xinjiang to the main industrial and population centres in eastern China. China is now Turkmenistan's [main export market](#) for its natural gas. Chinese state energy companies have invested in the exploitation of fossil fuels across the region, and also in [mining operations](#) such as gold and silver mines in Kyrgyzstan.

Institutional arrangements and cooperation platforms are also important. Economic cooperation is conducted within the overarching umbrella of the BRI, which is supposed to connect to Russia's

“
Chinese and Russian perspectives on the region are certainly not identical: China's involvement in Central Asia leans towards economics, while Russia focuses above all on geopolitics and security.

Eurasian Economic Union ([EAEU](#)). The EAEU has Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as members. Even if Russia's version of the BRI lacks substance, it is still an indication of the economic and political synergies intended to be achieved between China and Russia. In this

context, the SCO acts as an annual [talking shop](#) for resolving difficulties and smoothing out relations.

In this task, the SCO – which is essentially a forum for national leaders in which they can discuss cooperation and resolve problems – complements a range of other Chinese-initiated institutions and platforms. These include of course other summit-based forums such as BRICS and broad initiatives such as the BRI, but also institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank ([AIIB](#)), whose aim is to build infrastructure projects in global South countries. Alongside the SCO in Central and South Asia, other regions have their own multilateral cooperation platforms: for instance, there are the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum ([CASCF](#)) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation ([FOCAC](#)).

Overarching all of these are three loftily-framed global initiatives: Xi Jinping's Global Development Initiative ([GDI](#)), Global Security Initiative ([GSI](#)), and Global Civilisation Initiative ([GCI](#)). These were introduced in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively. The GDI, GSI and GCI are indicative of the Chinese government's aims in the Xi era: like a three-pronged instrument, they aim at achieving economic and security cooperation within a framework of peaceful cooperation based on economics (development), military power (security), and harmony of interests between states with distinct historical and cultural traditions (which is what is intended to be inferred from the word "civilisation"). Cooperation is to be achieved through economic, security and institutional cooperation, facilitating a form of complex interdependence within which relations between participating countries become steadily less confrontational and more intertwined. In this sense, the SCO, which preceded everything else, is one of the earliest manifestations of the Chinese vision of globalisation, as well as a standard-bearer for that vision going forward.

| 3 Turkey, Indonesia, and other fence-sitters

It is not surprising that Iran and Belarus joined the SCO. Iran is seen as a [rogue state](#) by the US and Europe, while Belarus is obviously aligned with Russia, not least in its war with Ukraine. However, nothing similar can be said about others who are flirting with the organisation such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Qatar.

Turkey is an interesting case in that it has long been a NATO member. It has also been seeking EU membership for about two decades. Since the foundation of the [Turkish Republic](#) under the reformer Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the nation has leaned to the West. Now, however, seemingly frustrated at the lack of attention from the EU, it seems that current

president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may be turning his Republic of Türkiye eastwards – or at least hedging his bets. In an interview with [Newsweek](#), Erdoğan stated that he does not consider the question of Turkey's simultaneous membership of NATO and SCO to be problematic.

In 2023, oil titan Saudi Arabia joined the SCO as a [“dialogue partner”](#), suggesting that it may be moving away from the West, while still retaining ties with the US and Europe. The same kind of fence-sitting behaviour may be observed in other Persian Gulf fossil fuel exporters such as Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar, all of whom are also dialogue partners. However, the simple fact that the whole Persian Gulf group is [edging eastwards](#) is indicative of the impact of meetings with Chinese representatives in the CASC and of growing ties with China and Russia rather than just the West.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that [Indonesia joined BRICS](#) on 6 January 2025. Indonesia, unlike its Southeast Asian neighbours Cambodia and Myanmar, is not an SCO dialogue partner. Yet its growing [economic ties](#) with China and the BRICS membership explain why another long-term hedger now has one foot in the Sino-Russian camp. Time will tell if Jakarta decides to become a dialogue partner of the SCO – but it would not be much of a shock if it did.

| Conclusion

The SCO has been in existence for almost three decades. In that time, it has served as a talking shop to promote cooperation and resolve conflicts between China, Russia and the Central Asian states. Its relative success needs to be measured in terms of what has not happened (the possibility of armed conflicts or at least notable tensions between the members has been averted) as much as what has happened (for instance, increased Chinese investments and security cooperation in Central Asian states). Latterly, the SCO has expanded to include India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus, indicating that participating in it is attractive to other potential members.

The intention seems to be to expand even further. The list of dialogue partners and potential members is ever-increasing. Whether this is going



It would be dangerous to discount or underestimate an organization containing nations whose populations and territory dominate the Asian landmass

to dilute or enhance the effectiveness of the platform as a cooperation builder remains to be seen. Nevertheless, despite the reservations of some observers, the SCO seems to have a major role to play as part of China's alternative international architecture of institutions, platforms and initiatives. As an institution promoting global South cooperation, the SCO complements BRICS, the BRI, the EAEU and other regional cooperation platforms such as the CASC and FOCAC.

In fact, the SCO preceded all of them, even serving as a model for their creation.

In short, it would be dangerous to discount or underestimate an organisation containing nations whose populations and territory dominate the Asian landmass. The fact that the organisation seems to stand as a counter to the influence of the US-led liberal international order and its legacy organisations such as the G7 and NATO means that it needs to be studied and taken seriously, whatever weaknesses are apparent to its critics.

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PLA in the Arctic: under the ice?¹¹

By Niklas Swanström¹²

Abstract:

The Arctic presence of the PLA has evolved alongside Russia's power projection and strategic needs, as the PLA enhances its own capabilities in the region.

China is advancing its technologies and combat capabilities for the Arctic's conditions, ensuring its ability to operate independently and alongside Russian forces. A main concern is the development of its nuclear capabilities and ICBM responses in the Arctic environment.

The civil-military connection is evident and should be carefully considered when commercial enterprises are introduced in the Arctic.

Natural resources play a pivotal role in the growing Chinese presence in the Arctic. Investments in LNG and minerals are closely linked to PLA operations.

Technological developments for Arctic conditions are progressing rapidly, influencing not only regional security but also broader geopolitical dynamics

Keywords:

ICBM · Polar Region · Arctic · Civil-Military Fusion (CMF) · China-Russia · dual-use · Peoples Liberation Army (PLAN) · intelligence · Northern Sea Route (NSR)

| Introduction

The People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Arctic ambitions represent a significant expansion of Chinese military capabilities into polar regions, with interconnected aspects worth examining in detail. Turning the PLA into a “White Dragon” is a consequence of China's [Arctic policy](#). Just in 2024 China steadily expanded its military influence in the Arctic region through a series of military drills, natural resource extraction ventures, polar research, fishing operations, and what has been seen among the Arctic states as staging [provocative events](#). It is not only the growing Chinese presence in numerical terms but, more crucially, the depth of its

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presence and the Russian connection that is concerning. This paper primarily looks into the impact of PLA activities, but it is hard not to include dual-use operations.

The pattern of Sino-Russian military exercises in the Arctic has evolved significantly, starting with limited observer status for Chinese forces in Russian Arctic exercises and moving towards more integrated joint operations. The initial phase began with Chinese observers at Russian Northern Fleet exercises in the mid-2010s. This evolved into more direct participation, though initially limited to non-Arctic components of larger Russian exercises. A significant milestone was Chinese participation in Vostok-2018, which included elements in the Bering Sea and demonstrated the PLA's growing comfort with cold-weather operations. Joint naval exercises have progressively moved northward in the Arctic. The 2021 "Joint Sea" exercise included elements in the Sea of Japan with cold weather components, and by 2023, joint exercises included specific Arctic scenarios, particularly focusing on escort operations along the Northern Sea Route and submarine-related activities that will enable China to operate under the ice-cap and ensure the Chinese Strategic Forces a nuclear second strike capability, intelligence gathering as well as challenging NATO presence.

| 1 More Bang for the Buck?

In terms of naval capabilities, the PLA Navy has made substantial investments in developing submarines and surface vessels that can operate in Arctic conditions. The type [095 nuclear submarine](#) is particularly important, as these vessels are specifically designed with under-ice operations in mind. This represents a major shift in Chinese submarine doctrine and capabilities, potentially allowing for deterrent patrols or intelligence gathering under Arctic ice and to ensure a second-strike nuclear capability for China. The PLAN has also been quietly upgrading its surface combatant fleet with ice-strengthened hulls and cold-weather systems while simultaneously developing civilian-military dual-use vessels, ranging from research vessels to “commercial” fishing vessels, that could provide logistics support in Arctic waters.

“**The pattern of Sino-Russian military exercises in the Arctic has evolved significantly, starting with limited observer status for Chinese forces in Russian Arctic exercises and moving towards more integrated joint operations”**

Militarily, in coordination with the Russian Federation, China has been able to expand its footprint into the Arctic region. In July 2024, Russia and China flew four strategic bombers over the Chukchi Sea and Bering Sea. It was the first time that these planes took off jointly from a Northern Russian air base and was also the first time that a [Chinese bomber](#) flew into the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone. In late September 2024, Russia and China ran their first joint coast guard patrol. China and Russia also conducted the large [North Joint 2024](#) military drill.

These drills have focused on protecting Pacific and Arctic Sea routes from potential US attempts to block them. This consisted of two phases of training, anti-submarine measures and aerial defense. President Putin declared that it was the [largest military drill](#) of its kind in over thirty years. These exercises reflect a broader strategic alignment between China and Russia in the Arctic, though with clear Russian primacy in terms of experience and capabilities. The progression suggests a systematic approach to building Chinese Arctic military capabilities under Russian tutelage while strengthening regional joint operational capabilities. They also demonstrate joint Sino-Russian resolve regarding Arctic interests, particularly concerning the Northern Sea Route and resource development. This has implications for other Arctic stakeholders and suggests a long-term commitment to military cooperation in the region. The challenge is not least present for the EU and the Nordics when the US has seemed to distance itself from Europe and democratic states, in order to align itself more with Russia and authoritarian states, at least in the White House. This bilateral cooperation has been essential for China to develop its own capability to operate independently, and even if the major concern put to date has been the Sino-Russian connection, the PLAN operations will increasingly have to be viewed from its own ability and operational capacity.

In regard to naval operations, there has been a focus on escorting merchant vessels through ice, under-ice, submarine operations, and anti-

submarine warfare in [Arctic conditions](#). These exercises have increasingly incorporated scenarios involving protection of maritime economic assets, particularly around energy infrastructure. Ground forces have expanded cold-weather training, including Arctic warfare techniques, survival skills, and logistics in extreme conditions. Chinese troops have trained alongside Russian Arctic specialists, gaining experience in polar operations. There has also been a growing sophistication in joint air operations in Arctic conditions, including long-range aviation exercises and aerial refueling in cold weather environments. Recent exercises have included scenarios involving the defense of Arctic installations, such as [LNG facilities](#) at Yamal, and ports as Sabetta.

As a result, the PLA Forces have undergone significant adaptation to Arctic operations. This includes establishing specialized units trained for cold weather operations and developing equipment specifically designed for polar conditions. These units have conducted joint exercises with Russian forces in cold weather environments, suggesting a level of preparation for potential Arctic deployments. These forces' logistics capabilities have also been enhanced, with particular attention paid to the challenges of sustaining operations in extremely cold conditions. Much of China's changed military position in the Arctic has happened in the backdrop of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and it is unclear if this has been an advantage for China or if it has slowed down the PLA's march into the Arctic.

The strategic forces dimension should be particularly concerning for European observers, especially as the partnership and trust of the US has been severely damaged. China has shown increasing interest in Arctic trajectories for its strategic weapons systems, particularly ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles), as these northern routes could potentially complicate missile defense systems as well as ensure a nuclear second-strike capability. There's also evidence of Chinese investment in early warning capabilities across the Arctic region, including radar systems and satellite coverage. The PLA particularly focuses on establishing control capabilities along the [Northern Sea Route](#), viewing it as a critical strategic waterway for both commercial and military purposes. Technical cooperation eases this, and the wide array of exercises has served as platforms for testing joint communications systems in Arctic conditions, sharing ice navigation techniques, and developing common procedures for emergency response in polar environments. In addition, support operations with an increased focus on logistics chains exist, including establishing and operating temporary ice bases, refueling operations, and maintenance in extreme cold conditions. This includes testing of new cold-weather equipment and joint rescue operations.

| 2 Integration of Sino-Russian Civil and Military Capabilities

The integration of Sino-Russian civilian and military capabilities along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) represents a sophisticated blend of economic and security interests. This integration manifests in several interconnected ways, and often more than symbolically civilian. The development of ports along the NSR demonstrates this civil-military fusion approach. Ports like Sabetta and Yamal have been developed primarily for LNG exports. They include military-grade radar systems, expanded berths capable of accommodating military vessels, and sophisticated surveillance systems. Chinese investment in these facilities, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative, has included dual-use technologies and capabilities for commercial and military purposes.

The joint development of maritime domain awareness capabilities combines civilian vessel tracking for commercial purposes with military surveillance systems. Chinese-provided satellite coverage, ostensibly for commercial shipping support, integrates with Russian military surveillance networks. This includes advanced radar systems, underwater acoustic monitoring arrays, and automated identification system (AIS) tracking networks that serve both civilian traffic management and military intelligence purposes.

The integration of security forces shows patterns that should be concerning. Russian military units providing protection for energy infrastructure increasingly train alongside Chinese security personnel, particularly around critical LNG facilities. These joint protection forces operate under civilian authority but maintain military capabilities and training. Chinese security contractors at key infrastructure points coordinate with Russian military units, creating a layered security approach.

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Chinese-supplied communication systems serve commercial shipping but maintain military-grade encryption and security capabilities.

Joint emergency response capabilities have been developed that combine civilian and military resources. This includes search and rescue operations, oil spill response, and ice-breaking capabilities. Chinese and Russian forces conduct regular exercises integrating civilian vessels and aircraft with military assets, mainly focusing on scenarios involving threats to economic infrastructure. These response capabilities are not necessarily a threat to Europe, on

the contrary they could serve a civilian purpose. However, the covert operations combined with Russia's invasion of Ukraine should raise concerns in Europe.

The development of communication infrastructure along the NSR demonstrates sophisticated integration. Chinese-supplied communication systems serve commercial shipping but maintain military-grade encryption and security capabilities. These networks integrate with Russian military communication systems while supporting civilian operations, something that should be a concern for Europe.

Joint research and development programs, particularly in areas like ice navigation technology and Arctic-capable sensors, serve both civilian and military purposes. Chinese technical expertise in areas like satellite navigation complements Russian experience in Arctic operations, creating sophisticated dual-use capabilities. The mix of civilian and military capabilities also goes into the joint training programs on the military side, which increasingly integrate civilian and military elements. Exercise often involves scenarios protecting economic assets while simultaneously testing military capabilities. These include protection of LNG terminals, escort of commercial vessels, and response to hybrid threats against infrastructure.

The management of shipping along the NSR demonstrates sophisticated integration of civilian and military capabilities. Chinese commercial vessels operating along the route participate in Russian military exercises, while military vessels conduct escort operations under civilian authority. This creates a flexible force structure that can rapidly transition between commercial and military operations. Commercial operations serve as platforms for intelligence gathering. Chinese fishing vessels and research ships operating along the NSR are equipped with sophisticated sensor

systems that feed into joint military networks. This creates a comprehensive surveillance capability while maintaining civilian cover.

Planned expansions of NSR infrastructure show continued integration of civilian and military capabilities. New ports and facilities are being designed with dual-use capabilities from the outset while existing infrastructure is being upgraded to support commercial and military operations. This integrated approach presents challenges for European observers, as it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between civilian and military activities. The sophisticated blend of capabilities suggests a long-term strategy to develop comprehensive control over the NSR while maintaining plausible deniability regarding military intentions.

| 3 Intelligence and technology

The intelligence and technical aspects of PLA Arctic capabilities are particularly sophisticated. Chinese civilian research stations in the Arctic region have dual-use potential for signals intelligence gathering. The PLA has invested heavily in polar-specific satellite coverage and has developed [Arctic-capable unmanned aerial](#) and underwater vehicles. These systems are supported by enhanced polar navigation capabilities, crucial for operating in the unique conditions of high latitudes.

Force projection elements have seen significant development, though often disguised as civilian infrastructure. The PLA has been establishing polar logistics bases under civilian cover, developing Arctic-capable amphibious forces, and enhancing its ability to conduct air operations in polar conditions. Perhaps most significantly, the PLA has been developing a specialized Arctic warfare doctrine, indicating serious long-term strategic [interest in the region](#).

The combination of these capabilities suggests a comprehensive approach to developing Arctic military capabilities, often concealed behind civilian and scientific activities. The PLA's approach appears to be systematic and long-term, focusing on building the hardware and expertise needed for sustained Arctic operations. This military development parallels China's broader Arctic strategy, combining economic, scientific, and military elements to pursue what Beijing sees as its polar interests.

The focus on submarine capabilities stands out from a PLAN perspective, as it represents a potential challenge to NATO's traditional dominance of the underwater Arctic environment. The development of both nuclear and conventional submarines suggests an ambition to contest this strategic space actively. This naval development is complemented by sophisticated underwater surveillance systems and anti-submarine warfare capabilities,

indicating a comprehensive approach to underwater operations in the Arctic.

| 4 Money instead of weapons, or both?

China has been expanding its trade and mineral extraction influence primarily through partnerships with an isolated Russia. The Arctic LNG 2 project is a Russian gas initiative that is the second largest on the Gyda peninsula. During 2022-2023, Novatek, Russia's liquefied natural gas (LNG) producer, secured orders for gas turbines and related technology from Chinese suppliers for its Arctic LNG 2 project. It was sanctioned on November 2023 and the Chinese companies CNPC and CNOOC pulled out, but Wison New Energies withdrew its support first on June 21, 2024 and in August a fleet of Chinese cargo ships delivered the modules 1-3 power generation equipment to the site intentionally bypassing the sanctions. Despite U.S. diplomatic efforts to curtail this cooperation, China continued supplying the equipment until January 2025. At that point, new sanctions enacted at the end of Biden's term effectively suspended the deliveries.

The Chinese company MCC International Incorporation set up a partnership with Polar Lithium. Polar Lithium is a Russian joint venture between the state-owned Rosatom and Nornickel (the world's largest nickel producer). They aim to develop the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit located on the Kola peninsula. In June, Rosatom and Hainan Yangpu NewNew Shipping Co. Ltd agreed to ship goods from the Port of Archangelsk to China. This was followed by a similar agreement between Rosatom and NewNew to form a joint venture that aims to operate container vessels year-round on the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

| 5 Provocative Events on Svalbard

The Yellow River Research Station, located on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, celebrated its 20th anniversary. To commemorate this the Chinese travel agency, Newayer, chartered a vessel for 183 tourists. At the research base, the tourists almost all wore matching red jackets and Chinese flags, when they visited the station.

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Russia has been testing waters to potentially open its own research station in the abandoned mining town, Pyramiden.

A woman in a PLA uniform stood saluting and taking pictures with the tourists. On her arm was a PLA ground forces patch. Eight tourists on the cruise were PLA veterans, with at least one still having an ongoing, yet not active-duty role with the PLA. Concerns were raised in Norway as military actions and symbolism are forbidden on Svalbard by treaty. The Chinese embassy denied all wrongdoing when questioned by the Norwegian government.

Russia has been testing the waters to potentially open its own research station in the abandoned mining town, Pyramiden, located on Svalbard. The Russians have floated this station as possibly international, and thus, Russia has approached several countries, including China. China has yet to know whether it would become involved if the Pyramiden project were to continue.

| 6 Activities with Dual Use Possibilities

Concerns have been raised that the research China is doing in the Arctic has dual use purposes and may be used for military means. At the Yellow River Station, the Chinese Research Institute of Radio Wave Propagation (CRIRP) has two ongoing projects until 2030. CRIRP is a subsidiary company of China Electronics and Technology Group Corporations (CETC), China's largest military electronics conglomerate. An expose article in Newsweek has highlighted this connection and has lead to further scrutiny [from international Western actors](#). In the Chukchi Sea, the [Harbin Engineering University](#), which has been frequently linked to the military sector, has been researching underwater acoustics. This is especially important in the use and monitoring of submarines.

China's Arctic fishing activities remain relatively limited compared to its global fishing operations, though they serve important strategic purposes beyond commercial fishing. The primary connection to [PLAN operations](#) comes through dual-use capabilities and presence operations. China currently has a small but growing number of vessels operating in Arctic waters, primarily in the Barents Sea and off Greenland. These operations are often conducted through joint ventures with Russian companies or under agreements with Greenland. The actual catch volumes remain

relatively modest, though China has been actively pursuing fishing rights in newly accessible Arctic waters as ice coverage decreases.

The PLAN connection manifests in several ways. The fishing vessels often serve as platforms for maritime domain awareness, equipped with advanced sensors and communication systems that can feed into PLAN's intelligence-gathering network. These vessels help establish patterns of presence and familiarize Chinese crews with Arctic operating conditions. Some fishing vessels are specifically designed with reinforced hulls and enhanced communication capabilities that exceed normal fishing requirements, suggesting dual-use roles. It should be noted that the usage of fishing vessels [is not specific to the Arctic](#), but a rather normalized PLAN behavior.

The integration with PLAN operations appears most evident in three areas:

- First, fishing vessels help establish a legitimate presence in strategic areas, particularly along the Northern Sea Route and near critical chokepoints.
- Second, they provide platforms for gathering environmental and oceanographic data useful for submarine operations.
- Third, they help develop Arctic seamanship skills and cold-weather operating experience that benefit both civilian and military operations.

The connection between fishing fleets and naval operations is particularly evident in crew [training and technology](#) sharing. Many fishing vessel crews receive specialized training that goes beyond normal commercial requirements, including advanced navigation in ice conditions and sophisticated communications procedures. This training appears designed to support broader maritime operations beyond purely commercial fishing.

While China's Arctic fishing activities remain relatively modest compared to its global fishing operations, their strategic value appears to outweigh their commercial importance. The fishing fleet serves as a [key component](#) of China's integrated approach to establishing an Arctic presence and developing operational capabilities in polar waters.

It is worth noting that unlike China's distant water fishing operations in other regions, which often involve large fleets, Arctic fishing remains selective and strategic. This suggests a focus on presence and capability development rather than maximum resource extraction. This pattern aligns with broader PLAN objectives in the Arctic region.

| 7 Europe's reactions frozen in ice?

The European response in the Arctic has been slow and often too reliant on US military and political support. However, in light of the aggressive actions of the US president against European security and the very survival of Ukraine, little speaks for transatlantic cooperation in the coming years. Europe would need to develop its own Arctic strategy independent of US interests, and limit cooperation with the US if the transatlantic tension continues, or other relevant actors, including China when it suits its interest.

“**The European response in the Arctic has been slow and often too reliant on US military and political support.**

In regard to China and the PLA, the EU would need to strengthen its military capacity in the region to counter combined Sino-Russian military actions. It would require a substantial increase in Arctic-ready maritime and ground troops capable of countering refined military operations and operations other than war. The cooperation with UK would be of particular military

interest. With the UK's proximity to the Arctic with useful logistical hubs in the North Sea, its naval capacity, and the common concerns cooperation would increase joint military capacity. Similarly, Norway and Iceland are crucial partners for EU in its counter strategy. The Nordics, and Arctic states, already being in close cooperation with Iceland and Norway this would not only be relatively easy, but also crucial to ensure the security of all partners in the Arctic. To some extent, this would be knocking on open doors, but with the insecurity of the US intentions with Europe and Greenland, it will be essential to expand intra-European cooperation.

There needs to be a better understanding of the interplay between military and non-military operations in the Arctic and the military implications for PLA. The ongoing and future possible usage of research facilities and commercial operations for military purposes is concerning, and the EU needs to closely monitor these and decrease the possible military impact. Much of the earlier studies have focused on the US or NATO, and it is increasingly important to narrow that to an extended European security.

Europe would need to strengthen its understanding of PLA, its operational capacity, and strategic thinking, which could be directed toward European interests. That should not necessarily be negative, on the contrary Europe

should explore in what areas collaboration with PLA could be in Europe's interests, and decrease the Russian threat to European security, especially with American threats to European national sovereignty in the Arctic and in Ukraine.

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Book Review:

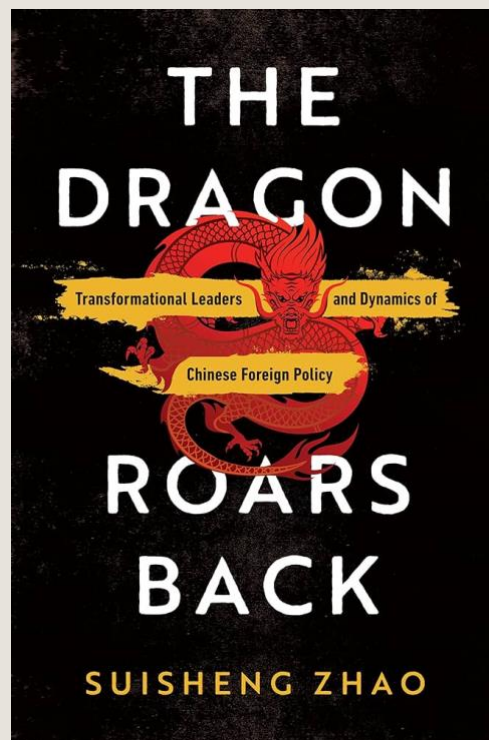
The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy by Suisheng Zhao.

Stanford University Press, 2023. 358 pp. ISBN: 9781503630888.

by Saban Yuksel¹³

In *The Dragon Roars Back*, Suisheng Zhao pushes back against the dominant habit of explaining Chinese foreign policy through structural abstractions alone. Where much of the literature treats China's behavior as a near-automatic function of shifting material power, regime type, or international systemic pressure, Zhao insists that leaders matter—and matter decisively. His argument is not that structure is irrelevant, but that structure does not act by itself. Chinese foreign policy, he argues, is filtered through the ambitions, historical sensibilities, ideological projects, and institutional interventions of paramount leaders. The result is an ambitious and sharply argued reinterpretation of the People's Republic of China's foreign policy trajectory from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping.

Zhao's core claim is both clear and consequential: the major turns in Chinese foreign policy cannot be adequately explained by power transition logic or by the fixed characteristics of authoritarian rule alone. If structural realism were sufficient, the dramatic shifts between Mao's revolutionary militancy, Deng's developmental pragmatism, and Xi's assertive big-power diplomacy would be harder to account for. If regime type were determinative, the post-Mao moderation of Chinese foreign policy would be equally puzzling, since the one-party authoritarian structure remained



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intact. Zhao's answer is a leadership-centered framework in which transformational leaders do not merely respond to context; they actively reorder China's ideational environment, reshape policymaking institutions, and strategically exploit external circumstances to set a new foreign-policy course.

The book is organized around this framework with admirable clarity. Part One examines how Mao, Deng, and Xi each established a distinct foreign policy orientation: Mao's "revolutionary diplomacy," Deng's "developmental diplomacy," and Xi's "big power diplomacy." Part Two turns to the ideational and institutional conditions that sustain these agendas, focusing on historical memory, nationalism, and the party-state hierarchy. Part Three situates Chinese foreign policy in the international environment, addressing how leaders respond to power distribution, globalization, and the world order. This architecture is one of the book's real strengths. Zhao does not simply narrate the succession of leaders; he builds an explanatory model and then tests it across historical periods and analytical levels.

Methodologically, Zhao combines historical synthesis with conceptual argument. Drawing on memoirs, official documents, Chinese-language materials, interviews, and an extensive secondary literature, he reconstructs both the evolution of policy and the political logic behind it. The book's empirical reach is broad, spanning the Korean War, the Sino-Soviet split, the opening to the United States, Deng's post-Mao recalibration, and Xi's recentralization of authority and nationalism-driven assertiveness. Zhao's use of historical episodes is not ornamental. He deploys them to dismantle lazy assumptions about continuity in Chinese foreign policy and to show that major strategic reorientations have repeatedly emerged from leadership change rather than from smooth structural adaptation.

One of the book's most valuable interventions is its insistence that foreign policy in the PRC is inseparable from domestic political construction. Zhao shows persuasively that Chinese leaders do not merely define interests; they manufacture the ideational and bureaucratic conditions through which those interests become legible and actionable. Historical memory—especially the tension between imperial glory and the "century of humiliation"—is not treated as background culture but as a political resource. Nationalism is similarly analyzed not as a spontaneous emotional force but as something alternately managed, contained, or inflamed depending on leadership priorities. On this reading, Xi Jinping's foreign policy assertiveness is not just a response to China's material rise. It is also the product of an explicitly cultivated narrative of victimization,

rejuvenation, and rightful centrality, coupled with the recentralization of authority in Xi's own hands.

Zhao is especially strong on Xi. The book's discussion of Xi as a "supreme leader" is one of its sharpest contributions. Rather than depicting current Chinese foreign policy simply as the inevitable posture of a stronger China, Zhao argues that Xi's worldview, political methods, and institutional centralization have intensified and personalized China's external behaviour in ways that another leader might not have. The move from low-profile diplomacy to a more overtly combative posture is therefore not reducible to aggregate power growth. Zhao's point here is convincing, and it cuts against a good deal of deterministic analysis in international relations. The China that "shows its sword" is not merely richer and stronger than Deng's China; it is also governed by a leader who has made nationalist mobilization, party discipline, and centralized strategic control integral to foreign policy itself.

The book's theoretical ambition is also notable. Zhao is attempting more than a historical account of PRC diplomacy. He is intervening in broader debates in foreign policy analysis and international relations theory by reopening the question of agency under authoritarianism. His framework suggests that highly centralized political systems may magnify the role of leaders rather than reduce politics to regime logic. That is a useful corrective to scholarship that either fetishizes structure or treats "China" as a unitary actor with stable preferences. Zhao's emphasis on the interaction between leaders, institutions, ideational narratives, and the external environment gives the book analytical range beyond China studies narrowly defined.

Still, the book is not above criticism. Zhao's leadership-centred framework is persuasive, but at times it risks swinging too far away from structural explanation. His argument succeeds in showing that leaders mediate structure; it is somewhat less successful in specifying the limits of that mediation. There are moments when the analysis comes close to attributing too much coherence and causal weight to individual leaders, especially Xi, and too little to deeper institutional, economic, and strategic constraints that may channel policy regardless of personal ambition. Put bluntly, the framework is strongest when it demonstrates that leaders matter more than many structural accounts admit; it is weaker when it implies that leadership is the master variable.

A related problem is that the categories of "transformational" and "transactional" leadership, while useful, can be too tidy. Mao, Deng, and Xi are cast as transformational; Jiang and Hu as transactional. The distinction works at a high level, but reality is messier. Deng, for example,

was institution-building and pragmatic, yet also deeply interventionist and willing to override consensus. Xi is clearly transformational in ambition,



The Dragon Roars Back is a serious and important book. It is analytically disciplined, historically rich, and unafraid to challenge entrenched orthodoxies in the study of Chinese foreign policy.

but the book sometimes risks turning transformation into a synonym for centralization plus assertiveness. Those are not trivial objections, because the typology does a great deal of explanatory work. Zhao's argument would have been stronger had he pressed harder on the ambiguities and overlaps within these categories rather than relying on them so cleanly.

Some readers may also find that the book privileges elite intent over policy reception and implementation. Zhao is attentive to institutions, but the dominant

motion of the argument still runs from the top down. That is analytically defensible given the subject matter, but it leaves less room for the autonomous role of bureaucratic fragmentation, policy drift, or unintended consequences. In a system as large and internally differentiated as the PRC, that omission matters.

Even so, *The Dragon Roars Back* is a serious and important book. It is analytically disciplined, historically rich, and unafraid to challenge entrenched orthodoxies in the study of Chinese foreign policy. Zhao's central point—that China's international behaviour has been shaped not just by rising power or authoritarian rigidity, but by leaders who redefine priorities, mobilize ideas, restructure institutions, and exploit opportunity—is persuasive and worth arguing with. Anyone working on Chinese foreign policy, authoritarian politics, or the relationship between leadership and grand strategy will have to contend with this book. It does not settle the debate. It sharpens it.

