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Problems of the divided nations: China-Taiwan

In what ways does Chinese national identity shape
the People's Republic of China's policy toward
Taiwan?

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Introduction

China's "reunification" with Taiwan is inevitable, and that people on both sides "should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Reuters, 2023).

In his 2023 New Year's address, Xi Jinping reaffirmed his commitment to advancing the process of reunification with what Beijing considers a rebel province, Taiwan. Over the years, China has steadily increased its military presence as a means of pressuring the Republic of China. This situation includes frequent incursions of warships and military aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and across the Taiwan Strait median line (Malyasov, 2025). Notably, in both April 2022 and April 2023, China intensified its military response in reaction to growing ties between the United States and Taiwan, particularly following U.S. arms sales authorized under the Taiwan Relations Act. These developments have significantly contributed to rising tensions in cross-Strait relations (Reuters, 2023).

Xi declared in a speech broadcast by China's state media, *"The people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family. No one can sever our family bonds, and no one can stop the historical trend of national reunification"*. These statements reveal China's deep commitment. However, how can we understand the use of coercive threats toward Taiwan, even as Beijing claims to seek peaceful reunification? These questions lie at the heart of my research. As previously announced, my study will be guided by the following research question: *"In what ways does Chinese national identity shape the People's Republic of China's policy and strategic behavior toward Taiwan?"* Using constructivist theories to address this question, we will not formulate any hypotheses but will explore the issue through analysis (Reuters, 2023).

1. Research Motivation

My choice of research topic comes from a long-standing interest in Chinese history. I have always been particularly fascinated by Taiwan's unique political situation and sought to understand the dynamics shaping cross-Strait relations. Initially, my focus was specifically on Taiwan—the role of Taiwanese nationalism in resisting reunification and how this is reflected in both discourse and policy. Taiwan's evolution from dictatorship to democracy, its strategic importance as a leading semiconductor producer, and the broader geopolitical stakes have all captured my attention.

However, as I delved deeper into the literature, I found myself increasingly interested in China's perspective. I realized that exploring how Chinese national identity shapes its approach to Taiwan would be both intellectually stimulating and personally challenging. I wanted to understand how contemporary Chinese identity chooses assertive rhetoric and actions toward Taiwan, and why Beijing continues to frame the Taiwan issue as a strictly domestic matter—insisting that foreign actors, particularly the United States, should not interfere. China is not a democratic country, yet it plays a prominent role on the international stage, particularly through its political discourse. Its national identity strongly influences its policy toward Taiwan and offers valuable insight into the motivations behind its actions. In cross-Strait relations, we can observe a shift in strategy between the leadership of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, alternating between softer approaches and more coercive approaches depending on the context. It is particularly interesting to examine how both leaders have consistently tied Chinese identity to Taiwanese identity, reinforcing this narrative within the population.

This research will focus exclusively on China's perspective. Its primary objective is to analyze the evolution of the belief that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China—examining its origins and how this conviction alternates between conciliatory and aggressive policies. Special attention will be given to the role of political elites, particularly the presidency, in shaping discourse and strategy to advance reunification, while also exploring the broader stakes involved.

The central aim is to investigate the link between national identity and China's actions toward Taiwan. The study will combine discourse analysis with an examination of China's policies and behaviors regarding Taiwan. The timeframe covered will span from the beginning of Hu Jintao's presidency through to the end of Tsai Ing-wen's term in 2024, under Xi Jinping's leadership. Particular emphasis will also be placed on China's relationship with the United States and its influence on Beijing's stance toward Taiwan.

As previously stated, this research adopts a constructivist approach to better grasp the complexities of Chinese national identity. Realist or liberal perspectives alone would be insufficient to capture the nuanced motivations behind China's behavior. Focusing on national identity as a key driver in China's foreign policy is therefore highly relevant. Within this framework, special emphasis will be placed on historical events and discourse analysis, as shifts in identity are often reflected in the narratives constructed by political leaders and the interpretation of significant historical moments. Major speeches—such as New Year's

addresses, Party congress presentations, and official seminars—deliver powerful messages that shape public perception and reinforce national identity. Additionally, secondary sources, including newspaper reports and scholarly analyses, will be consulted.

Despite access to a broad range of resources, this research faces several methodological limitations. The first challenge concerns language: my limited proficiency in Mandarin restricts my ability to engage directly with academic articles and political speeches in their original form. Consequently, I will rely on translations and secondary analyses by reputable scholars, both Western and Chinese, who publish in English. The second limitation involves access to primary Chinese sources, some of which may be available only within China or are not publicly accessible outside its borders, limiting the scope of materials I can examine. Finally, I acknowledge the potential bias stemming from my positionality. Given linguistic and geographical constraints, my perspective may be influenced by Western interpretations of China, which could affect my approach to and analysis of the subject.

2. Literature review

This paper aims to explore how China constructs and perceives its national identity, both domestically and on the international stage, with a particular focus on its discourse and actions toward Taiwan. By drawing on a diverse body of academic literature, this study seeks to compare developments across the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping administrations in order to shed light on the evolution of China's foreign policy, its security concerns, and its perception of key factors such as Taiwan and the United States. The theoretical framework is primarily constructivist, though references to realist and liberal approaches will also help broaden the analysis. These works provide useful conceptual tools for understanding the narratives that shape Chinese diplomacy and behavior.

This literature review engages with several key academic contributions that either directly address my research questions or provide perspectives to refine them. A major limitation in the existing literature is that most studies tend to focus exclusively on one administration—either Hu Jintao's or Xi Jinping's—without offering a comprehensive comparative perspective. Often, they highlight what Xi retained or rejected from Hu, rather than examining broader continuities or ideological transformations. Additionally, the dominant theoretical lenses remain realism and liberalism, which, while useful, may overlook identity-based explanations emphasized in constructivist thought.

Much of the scholarship aligns with my central argument: that China's foreign policy is deeply influenced by a historically grounded sense of national identity and an increasingly assertive drive for reunification with Taiwan. A particularly valuable source is Rex Li's work, which, although focused solely on the Hu Jintao era and primarily concerned with China's security identity, adopts a multi-theoretical framework that includes realism, liberalism, and constructivism. One of the strengths of Li's study is its foundation in a broad corpus of Chinese-language sources, which enriches his analysis. While his work also examines China's relations with Japan and Russia—areas I do not address in this paper—it offers valuable insights into the subtle interplay between identity and national interest.

Another relevant contribution is the volume *Taiwan face à la Chine*, which emphasizes the Xi Jinping administration and balances the Chinese and Taiwanese perspectives. This dual approach enhances our understanding of cross-Strait dynamics by considering the evolving identity narratives on both sides.

A third essential reference is *The Xi Jinping Effect* by Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han. This work explores China's transition toward a more authoritarian model, focusing on how changing norms, values, and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced domestic and international politics. The authors, like myself, argue that Xi's discourse is heavily shaped by historical memory and that growing pressure on Taiwan reflects this evolving narrative. Notably, their analysis goes beyond constructivism by incorporating other theoretical perspectives, which broadens the understanding of China's political transformations.

While I have not identified a single publication that simultaneously offers a constructivist and comparative analysis of both the Hu and Xi eras, I do not claim to break entirely new ground. The evolution of Chinese nationalism and its influence on foreign policy has already been the subject of extensive scholarly work. Nevertheless, my contribution lies in bringing these elements together—constructivist identity analysis, discourse comparison, and cross-era evolution—with a specific focus on Taiwan. The academic contributions of Matteo Dian (2017), Elizabeth C. Economy (2021), Kerry Brown (2019), Jean-Pierre Cabestan (2005–2022), Françoise Mengin (2013), Hugues Tertrais (2013), Angela Poh & Mingjiang Li (2017), Andrew Scobell (2020), Thomas J. Shattuck (2020), and Qiang Xin (2020) have also significantly informed my thinking by offering critical insights into China's historical narratives, political strategies, and identity-based motivations.

3. Scope and focus

This study employs constructivism and discourse analysis to understand how China's national identity is constructed and how both internal and external discourses shape it, with the aim of better understanding China's actions toward Taiwan. The analysis recognizes that China's identity is not solely self-defined but is also shaped through interactions with the external world, including how other states and international actors perceive and engage with China.

Focusing on the administrations of Hu Jintao (2003–2013) and Xi Jinping (2013–2024), this study aims to uncover strategic shifts in China's narrative, rhetoric, and actions concerning Taiwan. The external perspective is also important to consider because, as Wendt (1992) argued, a country is recognized as a member of the society of states through a "*social construction*."

The key aspects that this analysis will undertake include:

1. **Narrative Construction:** How the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) frames Taiwan as an integral part of China, and how this narrative has evolved over time.
2. **International Recognition:** The role of external perceptions in shaping China's identity, following Wendt's (1992) concept of states as social constructs within the international community.
3. **Identity Shifts:** Tracking changes in China's self-perception and their implications for cross-strait relations.
4. **Discursive Strategies:** Analyzing the language, symbols, and rhetorical devices used to reinforce China's claims over Taiwan.

By adopting a constructivist lens, this study moves beyond purely materialist explanations to highlight the role of socially constructed identities, shared norms, and evolving discourses in shaping state behavior. It particularly emphasizes how these factors influence state behavior in the post-Cold War era. This approach offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of the China-Taiwan relationship, especially in the context of shifting global power structures (Checkel, 1998; Wendt, 1992).

The following sections will delve deeper into the key concepts guiding this case study, providing a theoretical foundation for understanding China's approach to Taiwan through the lens of constructivism and discourse analysis. In this context, a constructivist approach provides valuable insight into the China-Taiwan relationship by examining how discourse shapes China's identity and, in turn, its actions.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework and Methodology

1. The constructivist framework

1.1. Introduction to constructivism

This research adopts constructivism as its primary theoretical framework to analyze China's approach to Taiwan. Constructivism facilitates a deeper understanding of how identity, national interests, and security are not inherently given but are socially constructed through ideas, norms, and collective identities. Rather than viewing foreign policy as solely driven by material capabilities or rational calculations, this approach emphasizes the influence of shared norms, evolving discourses, and socially constructed identities in shaping state behavior (Checkel, 1998; Wendt, 1992).

Emerging in prominence during the 1980s, constructivism challenges the assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism by highlighting the critical role of ideational factors in international relations (Battistella, 2012). As Checkel (1998) argues, constructivist approaches criticize traditional theories not for what they explicitly state but for what they omit: the sources and content of state interests, the social fabric of world politics, and the broader theoretical discourse shaping international relations.

At its core, constructivism posits that the international system is not an objective reality but a social construct (Macleod, 2004). Accordingly, the meanings, practices, and identities of states are shaped by historical, political, economic, and geographical contexts. Moreover, rules and standards play an essential role in guiding the behavior of actors within international politics. Constructivism particularly stresses the importance of intersubjectivity—that is, the shared understandings and norms that influence actor behavior and the formation of institutions in the international arena (Klotz & Lynch, 1999). Institutions and structures are therefore viewed as social constructs that extend beyond formal organizations to include the underlying discourses that give them meaning.

A key principle of constructivism is that a state's interests are not fixed but closely tied to its identity (Wendt, 1992, 2004). National interests are socially constructed and shaped by cultural and normative contexts, which influence how a state perceives itself and its role within the

international system (Deschaux-Dutard, 2018). While national interests encompass security and survival, they are embedded within these broader social frameworks. This perspective challenges realist assumptions by arguing that states act not only on rational power calculations but also guided by shared ideas, beliefs, and values.

As Risse-Kappen (in Deschaux-Dutard, 2018) contends, constructivism posits a close link between national identity, the definition of national interests, and the shaping of states' foreign and security policies. This framework allows exploration of how evolving perceptions of national identity can lead to transformations in policy. Constructivism offers insights into both the internal and external dimensions of state identity. Internally, national interests are constituted by shared ideas and beliefs that structure international political life and imbue it with meaning (Battistella, 2012). These interests and identities are malleable products of specific historical processes, shaped by dominant societal discourses. Externally, a state's identity is shaped through interactions with other actors in the international system. This holistic approach emphasizes that structure influences not only actors' behavior but also their identities and interests. State structures evolve through shared ideas about identity among actors.

Three core concepts structure this analysis: identity, national interest, and the discourse of security.

First, identity refers to how a state defines itself—its norms, culture, and collective self-understanding. Identity can be understood both internally and externally. Internal identity is rooted in historical narratives and cultural practices that create a sense of “we” and establish national stakes. External identity, by contrast, is shaped through the state's engagement with others. How China is perceived by external actors—and whether it is recognized or labeled, for example, as a “*rogue state*”—feeds back into how it understands itself and behaves on the international stage.

Second, national interest is treated not as fixed or objective, but as constructed through ideas and social contexts. Interests are tied both to material realities and social relationships; they are legitimized and promoted through specific actors, often reflecting broader national narratives. This aligns with Katzenstein's argument that interests are shaped by identity, and that these identities evolve over time, especially in the absence of rigid ideological divisions like those of the Cold War.

Third, the discourse of security is analyzed to demonstrate that security is not simply a response to objective threats but a product of meaning-making. From a constructivist perspective, security is not a fixed material concern but is constructed through discourse. The concepts of what is “*secure*” or “*insecure*” are shaped by underlying assumptions about identity and the nature of the international system.

To analyze these dynamics, discourse analysis serves as the main methodological tool. This approach unpacks how meanings are constructed through language and how these meanings influence political behavior and decision-making. Discourse is not merely reflective but constitutive: it shapes how a state perceives itself, its interests, and the threats it faces.

By adopting a constructivist framework and employing discourse analysis, this study offers deeper insight into the enduring complexities of the China-Taiwan relationship. It examines the evolution of China’s national identity, its discourse on the “*One China*” principle, and its actions under different presidencies. Additionally, it investigates how China constructs its external identity, how U.S. and Taiwanese actions influence its responses, the image China seeks to project internationally, and its efforts to enhance security. Ultimately, this study explores how discourse shapes China’s identity and how this, in turn, influences its policy toward Taiwan.

1.2. “Stato-centrism” of Wendt

State personhood, as Wendt (2004) argues, is a constructed discourse—a “*useful fiction*” because it frames states as unified actors, even though they are ultimately shaped by the behavior and speech of individuals. While states depend on material realities, their existence is fundamentally a product of collective perception, shaped by structures and systems. Similarly, Battistella (2012) emphasizes that dominant narratives are not mere reflections of reality but discursive constructions that shape collective beliefs and ideas.

The way a state is perceived—both internally and externally—depends on prevailing discourse, which influences its identity, legitimacy, and policy choices. This perspective suggests that international relations are not solely about material power but about the narratives that define and justify state actions. Wendt (2004) reinforces this idea by arguing that state personhood is real in the sense that states behave as entities, but their identity is socially constructed through discourse and interaction. By recognizing state personhood as a discursive construct, we can better understand how states develop their identities, shape their interests, and justify their actions in the international system.

Wendt identifies two key distinctions when defining a state as a person. The first concerns how states are constituted both internally and externally. Internally, this refers to the roles, structures, and processes within the “*body*” of the state (Wendt, 2004), as well as the unifying role of discourse and narratives in shaping national identity (Massie & Roussel, 2011). This internal sovereignty allows a state to exercise political control over its territory.

Externally, statehood depends on social recognition. Wendt argues that sovereignty is not an inherent property but a social construct that emerges through interstate interactions. As states treat each other as sovereign entities, they integrate this perception over time. This perspective highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of sovereignty. Importantly, internal and external sovereignty do not always align. Some situations, such as Taiwan, have clear internal sovereignty but lack broad international recognition to be considered an independent country, while China considers it a national issue. Conversely, some internationally recognized states struggle to maintain internal control over their territory. Historically, in the Westphalian system, internal sovereignty was a precondition for external recognition, but this is not always the case today.

Wendt also defines the state as a “*rational actor*” with a unitary identity that persists over time. States, in this view, hold beliefs about their environment, possess transitive preferences that drive their actions, and make rational choices, typically based on expected utility maximization (Wendt, 2004).

Drawing from psychology, Wendt outlines four conditions a state must meet to be considered an organism:

Individualized – States have unique characteristics, such as history and discourse.

Organized – They function through structured institutions.

Homeostatic – They resist entropy through borders and internal organization, maintaining stability.

Autonomous – Their behavior is at least partially independent of their environment.

While states may function like intentional organisms, attributing collective consciousness to them is more complex. Wendt presents three arguments for the possibility of state consciousness:

Practical Utility – Discussions of state emotions help explain foreign policy, implying these references have meaning.

Biological Analogy – While states are not living organisms, they resemble superorganisms, leaving open the possibility of consciousness.

Normative Importance – Consciousness is central to self-determination and value. Without it, the state remains an artificial and incomplete “person,” weakening its legitimacy.

Wendt suggests that “*the narrative theory of state subjectivity*” offers a useful way to conceptualize collective consciousness. However, he acknowledges a physical limitation: at the individual level, subjectivity is not just a narrative but also the experience of that narrative.

Wendt’s framework is particularly valuable for analyzing China’s foreign policy and its claim over Taiwan, as it highlights how state identity is socially constructed through both internal narratives and external recognition. Constructivism allows us to examine how China frames its national identity, not only through historical discourse but also through its interactions with the international community. By treating the state as a socially constructed “*person*,” Wendt’s approach explains how China seeks to maintain a coherent and legitimized identity, reinforcing its claims over Taiwan. This perspective also clarifies how China’s sovereignty is not just a material reality, but a discursive construct shaped by global perceptions and diplomatic interactions.

Ultimately, state-centrism provides a crucial lens for understanding how China’s policies and strategic decisions emerge from the interplay between internal unity and external recognition. The following sections will explore the key concepts underpinning this work, establishing the theoretical foundations for analyzing China's approach to Taiwan through the lenses of constructivism and discourse analysis.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Key Concepts of Constructivism

2.1. Defining State Identity

Identities are fundamental in both international politics and domestic society, providing stability and predictability. Without identity, the world would be chaotic, marked by uncertainty and heightened risk. Identities define who we are, how we perceive others, and shape interactions accordingly. For states, identity influences decision-making, shapes foreign and domestic policies, and reinforces self-perception through everyday social practices (Hopf, 1998). Constructivists argue that interactions between states are not driven by fixed national interests but by evolving patterns of action that shape and are shaped by state identities over time. Unlike realist or liberal perspectives, social constructivism emphasizes the role of norms, ideas, and institutional frameworks in international relations, highlighting how shifts in these elements can redefine state identities and interests (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002).

Discourse plays a crucial role in the formation of identity, both internally and externally. The way a state defines itself—and how it is perceived by others—depends on dominant narratives, institutional practices, and political rhetoric. Battistella (2012) argues that dominant narratives do not merely reflect reality but actively shape collective beliefs and political decisions. Levi-Strauss saw myths as structured discourses, gaining meaning when organized into distinct units. Stories, shared across societies, evolve as discourse expands (Barthes, 1966). Myths help shape a broader identity narrative, giving meaning to society's experiences. Weldes describes this as a process of interpellation, where distinctions like "*us*" vs. "*them*" are formed within a state's security imaginary (Massie & Roussel, 2011). For a discourse to dominate, it must be articulated by those who hold the "*monopoly on definition*" and be socially legitimate. Weldes argues that power lies in controlling "the definition of socially legitimate meaning," meaning political elites must align their narratives with societal expectations—what Fierke calls the collective imaginary—or risk being ignored. Public validation by the media, scholars, and citizens is essential in reinforcing these narratives (Massie & Roussel, 2011).

Kratochwil emphasizes that reality is not an objective truth but a shared interpretation shaped through political processes. Myths are not solely imposed by the elites. They emerge through social interactions where values and expectations give them meaning. Beauchemin highlights the balance between identity pluralism and the "necessary closure of the political community," arguing that myths reinforce national unity by providing common historical and identity

references (Massie & Roussel, 2011). The following two sub-chapters will explore the framing of both national and international identity.

This dynamic will be particularly relevant to China's national identity, where nationalism and collective memory play a crucial role in shaping domestic cohesion and foreign policy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strategically employs discourse to construct a unified vision of the nation, using historical narratives and ideological frameworks to define China's role in the world. Through official statements, policy documents, and media representations, China not only crafts its national identity but also legitimizes its claims—particularly regarding Taiwan. Analyzing these discourses reveals how China navigates external challenges, reinforces its self-image in global politics, and continuously shapes its strategic behavior through the interplay of historical memory, political ideology, and international interactions.

2.1.1. Internal Identity

Wendt (1992) reinforces the idea that "identities are the basis of interests," meaning a state's goals depend on how it defines itself. Deschaux-Dutard (2018) outlines key aspects of national interests, including physical survival, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective recognition, linking them to nationalism. Balzacq (2016) further explores how interests emerge, emphasizing their role as a driving force for action. These perspectives highlight that national interests are not fixed but shaped by identity, social interactions, and broader political dynamics—such as historical practices, identity framing, and the construction of stakes that define “we.”

While a state's external identity is shaped through interactions in the international system, its internal identity develops through domestic processes. These include shared historical narratives, cultural values, political institutions, national discourse, and nationalism (Hopf, 1998). Matteo Dian (2017) highlights the role of collective memory in shaping internal identity, influencing self-perception, national interests, and foreign policy decisions (Deschaux-Dutard, 2018). A strong internal identity, often reinforced by nationalism, enhances state cohesion, legitimacy, and its ability to pursue international objectives (Macleod, 2004). This is particularly relevant in understanding China's actions in the Taiwan Strait, where nationalism and collective memory play a crucial role.

Nationalism provides a framework for interpreting the past and mobilizing collective action (Wendt, 2004). It fosters a sense of shared destiny and belonging, forming a cornerstone of

internal identity. Shared historical narratives infused with nationalist sentiment reinforce a common purpose. Dian (2017) underscores the role of collective memory, including historical experiences, cultural traditions, and key events passed across generations. All these elements shape national identity and influence foreign policy. This memory strengthens national unity, legitimizes the political order, and mobilizes support for national goals while distinguishing "us" from "them" (Klotz, Lynch, Bouyssou & Smouts, 1999).

Cultural values also play a significant role in shaping internal identity (Battistella, 2012). They influence attitudes toward authority, individualism, and collectivism, reinforcing national identity and guiding policy choices (Deschaux-Dutard, 2018). Alongside national discourse, these values help construct a nation's self-image.

Political institutions further shape internal identity by regulating political competition, power distribution, and rights protection (Finnemore, 2004). National discourse—driven by political elites and the media—constructs a particular vision of the nation, mobilizes support, and marginalizes opposing viewpoints (Risse-Kappen in Deschaux-Dutard, 2018).

The ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is central to understanding China's national identity (Checkel, 1998). The CCP skillfully employs nationalism and collective memory to frame its vision, reinforcing a narrative that strengthens domestic cohesion and guides international behavior.

2.1.2. External Identity

Constructivism emphasizes that a state's identity, which shapes its interests and actions, is not solely determined internally but is also significantly influenced by its interactions with the external world. Interstate relations play a key role in shaping different perceptions of the world. Constructivism, by emphasizing the role of identity and social interactions, allows us to explore how these perceptions evolve over time. This external dimension of identity is formed through a state's engagement with other actors in the international system, the norms and practices that govern their interactions, and the ways in which a state is perceived and treated by others.

Ted Hopf (1998) speaks about the role of the international structure in his book *The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory*. He argues that international politics operates within a "structure," which is a set of relatively unchangeable constraints on the behavior of states. This structure depends on shared beliefs and interactions with other states. Meaningful actions can only occur within a shared social context. People interact and understand each other through norms and practices, which give meaning to their behavior. Without norms, the use of power or any action would be meaningless. Constitutive norms shape identity by defining the behaviors that lead others to recognize and respond to that identity.

Since structure relies on shared norms and practices, anarchy—the central structural concept in mainstream international relations theory—has no inherent meaning. Anarchy is typically defined as the absence of authority above states, but neither this absence nor the distribution of power alone determines state behavior. Instead, norms and practices give meaning to state actions, shaping how states perceive themselves and others (Hopf, 1998). A state's external identity is shaped through socialization and recognition. States learn how to behave in the international system by observing and interacting with others, internalizing norms and expectations about appropriate conduct. The way a state is perceived and treated by others also influences its self-perception. For instance, a state repeatedly labeled as a "rogue state" may internalize this identity, adopting policies that reinforce the label.

A rogue state refers to a country that repeatedly violates international norms and is perceived as a threat to global security and stability. Such states are often characterized by aggressive foreign policies, internal repression, and a disregard for diplomatic engagement or international cooperation. They may be seen as unpredictable, hostile to democratic values, and resistant to the rules and expectations set by the international community (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002).

Audie Klotz's study examines why major international institutions impose sanctions on states and regimes that violate global standards, focusing on South Africa's apartheid policy. Klotz argues that the rise of a global norm of racial equality played a key role in this process, demonstrating that norms do more than regulate state behavior—they also shape state identity. To explain how norms influence policy decisions, Klotz identifies three key mechanisms: community and identity, reputation and communication, and discourse and institutions (Checkel, 1998).

Balzacq (2016), referencing Dessler, emphasizes that "*rules are the condition of the other*," meaning that behavior depends on interactions with other actors. Wendt (2003) similarly argues that a state perceived as hostile or a rogue state will internalize this identity. The way the international community treats a state influence how it sees itself and acts in global affairs. Labeling certain states as dangerous or untrustworthy serves as a powerful tool in international politics. By designating a country as a rogue state, governments can justify foreign policy measures such as economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, or even military intervention. This framing shapes public perception, reinforcing the idea that strong action is necessary to counter perceived threats. Ultimately, external recognition—or lack thereof—plays a crucial role in shaping a state's identity and behavior within the international system (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002).

2.2. National Interests

The concept of "*national interest*" is often presented as a fixed and rational calculation guiding state behavior. Challenging this, Martha Finnemore argues in *National Interests in International Society* that such interests are socially constructed, shaped by international norms and institutions rather than predetermined. This view contrasts with traditional assumptions and highlights the significant role international bodies play in reshaping state interests. Finnemore emphasizes how states define their interests and how organizations can promote specific goals, guided by "moral entrepreneurs"—individuals who can instill their beliefs into global structures (Checkel, 1998). Balzacq (2016) supports this, noting that interests and actions are formed through identity, as part of a "*co-constitution between the agent and the structure*." This process correlates with the emergence of new systemic norms and leads to shifts in state behavior.

International institutions shape state behavior by promoting norms and values. However, Checkel (1998) challenges the idea of uniform norm diffusion, highlighting the role of domestic factors. Shared values contribute to state identities and their roles within the international system (Battistella, 2024). Finnemore further argues that strategic interests are not solely about power but also about shared meanings, including perceptions of enmity and rivalry (Deschaux-Dutard, 2018).

Great powers play a key role in shaping and promoting norms, with their foreign policy increasingly influenced by domestic factors (Griffiths & O’Callaghan, 2002). The discourse surrounding national interests is crucial for legitimacy, as myths shape national identity within a constructivist framework, where states seek recognition and aim to legitimize their actions. Myths, as Ernst Cassirer (in Massie & Roussel, 2008) argues, create meaning and define societal values through three stages: discursive articulation, internal legitimization, and external recognition. Political elites define state roles, values, and interests, which are then adopted by the community and either confirmed or challenged by foreign actors. Language shapes perceptions and legitimizes policies with external recognition reinforcing national identity—although myths can persist even without it.

This perspective helps analyze how China constructs and justifies its national interest in relation to international norms. It offers insight into the conflict’s nature, its potential for escalation or diplomacy, and how China’s approach aligns with or challenges global norms (Massie & Roussel, 2008).

2.3. Anarchy and security

Alexander Wendt (2004) famously argued that "*anarchy is what states make of it*," challenging traditional realist views that treat anarchy as an inherent and unchangeable condition of the international system. Instead, Wendt posits that anarchy is a social construct shaped by state interactions and shared understandings. This perspective shifts the focus from material structures to ideational factors, emphasizing that the nature of anarchy depends on how states perceive and engage with it. As we have seen through the explanation of external identity, a state's behavior is deeply influenced by shared norms, practices, and understandings. These shared ideas form the social structure of the international system, shaping how states perceive threats and opportunities. Anarchy itself is not a fixed or objective reality but is given meaning through these cultural formations and shared knowledge.

Security is a central concern in international relations and daily life, touching on various dimensions such as national security, personal security, and societal security. Barry Buzan (1983) defined security as "*the pursuit of freedom from any threat*." Security can be understood both objectively, referring to the absence of threats to core values—and subjectively, referring to the absence of fear that these values will be attacked (Battistella, 2009). These shared understandings about what constitutes security or insecurity are critical in shaping state behavior and interactions under an anarchic system. Security studies reflect, in this way, the constructivist shift. Barry Buzan expanded the concept of security beyond national defense to include military, political, economic, environmental, and societal dimensions. Building on this foundation, Ole Wæver introduced societal security through a constructivist lens. He argued that security is not an objective reality, but something created through discourse. According to Wæver, issues become security concerns when they are framed as such through speech acts (Ceyhan, 1998). This linguistic approach de-essentializes security by showing that it does not exist independently of the discourse that defines it.

Discourse analysis provides a valuable tool for examining how different interpretations of anarchy and security shape state behavior. In the context of China-Taiwan relations, analyzing China's discourse reveals how it constructs both the "*anarchic*" environment of the Taiwan Strait and its own security concerns. China's narrative often frames Taiwan as integral to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, while portraying external interference as a threat to regional stability. This framing shapes China's perception of its role in maintaining order within what it considers to be an anarchic environment.

By combining Wendt's constructivist insights on anarchy with Buzan's expanded concept of security and Wæver's linguistic approach to securitization, we can better understand how states like China construct their identities and interests in relation to perceived threats. Both anarchy and security are shaped by shared norms and discourses rather than being fixed realities. This perspective underscores how interactions between states are influenced by their interpretations of anarchy and security.

3. Discourse analysis

3.1. The Critical Discourse Analysis

To investigate how identity, national interests, and security are constructed in China, this study will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary methodological tool. CDA is particularly well-suited to exploring how language both reflects and shapes social realities, especially in political contexts where power and ideology are deeply embedded in discourse. Rooted in the work of scholars such as Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough, CDA is not a neutral linguistic method but a problem-oriented and interdisciplinary approach that seeks to uncover the hidden power dynamics behind language use.

As Wodak (2014) explains, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) understands discourse not simply as a collection of texts or speeches, but as a form of social practice—an ongoing, dynamic process shaped by, and shaping, broader social, historical, and institutional contexts. From this perspective, political speeches or policy statements are not mere reflections of pre-existing ideas or interests; they actively participate in constructing social realities. Discourse is thus socially constitutive: it helps shape collective identities, produce knowledge, legitimize authority, and maintain or contest power relations. This dialectical relationship between discourse and society is what makes CDA particularly useful for analyzing how states like China construct their identity and articulate security concerns in the public domain.

Building on this, Hansen (2006) argues that understanding the impact of political discourse requires examining how it is received and recontextualized across different social domains—for instance, in people's everyday lives. CDA enables the analysis of how political concepts and identity narratives, as expressed by political actors, are reinterpreted and transformed in other contexts. More specifically, it allows us to observe how meanings of terms like "*nation*"

or “*identity*” are co-constructed by individuals during ongoing public discussions, shaped by both local conditions and broader discursive interactions.

CDA also pays special attention to ideology and the way language is used to maintain or contest social domination. Wodak and Fairclough both argue that discourse can have ideological effects by framing certain perspectives as natural or legitimate while marginalizing others. For instance, in national discourse, the repeated use of binary oppositions such as “*us*” versus “*them*” helps construct and stabilize national identities by positioning the state in contrast to an external or internal “*other*.” Fairclough (2015) emphasizes that such discursive strategies are not arbitrary—they serve political functions such as delegitimizing opponents, justifying policies, or coercing public consensus.

This study draws particularly from Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which emphasizes the importance of tracing discourses across time and in relation to specific socio-political developments. Understanding the historical context is crucial for interpreting discourse effectively. The DHA identifies four macro-strategies used in the construction of national identity: *constructive strategies (which build or affirm identity)*, *preservative strategies (which justify or reinforce identity narratives)*, *transformative strategies (which seek to reshape identities)*, and *destructive strategies (which aim to dismantle existing identity constructs)*. These categories are instrumental for analyzing how Chinese discourse not only defines what it means to be “*Chinese*,” but also how it responds to perceived internal and external challenges to that definition.

In short, CDA provides both the conceptual framework and the analytical tools necessary to unpack the layered and often strategic use of language in Chinese domestic discourse. It allows us to explore how identity and national interest are not simply stated, but performed and reproduced through language, often in subtle yet powerful ways. By combining textual analysis with contextual interpretation, CDA helps illuminate the deeper meanings and political implications of how the Chinese state constructs its sense of self and its understanding of security.

3.2. “Us” vs the “Others”

Lene Hansen (2006) argues that identity construction in foreign policy discourse often hinges on articulating differences and defining a radical Other. Drawing on the work of Campbell and Connolly, she shows how the national Self is stabilized through representations of Others—such as Taiwan—as threats to national security or social cohesion. However, Hansen also highlights that identity need not always be forged through stark exclusion. Instead, it can emerge from more ambiguous or inclusive discourses, as seen in Nordic foreign policy or appeals to a shared European identity. In such cases, the Self may be constructed not only in opposition to the Other, but also in resemblance—or even perceived inferiority—thus allowing for a broader spectrum of identity configurations than traditional security discourses typically acknowledge. This multiplicity of meaning reflects the shifting and contested nature of discourse, where the same signifiers can be reinterpreted in divergent ways depending on context.

A further analytical layer draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. From this perspective, national identity can be understood as a shared habitus—a set of internalized dispositions, emotional attitudes, and perception schemes that are collectively shaped and reproduced through national socialization processes. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) expand on this by proposing that nations should be seen as mental constructs or “*imagined political communities*”, represented in the minds and memories of nationalized subjects as sovereign and bounded units. These imagined communities function as powerful guiding ideas, carrying both unifying and destructive potential. They argue further that national identities, as specific forms of social identity, are discursively constructed through language and other semiotic systems. These identities are continually produced, reproduced, transformed, or even dismantled through figurative and reifying discourses propagated by politicians, intellectuals, media figures, and institutions such as education, mass communication, the military, and even sports. The nation thus becomes “real” not as an objective fact, but as a widely shared belief system, sustained by the repeated circulation of legitimizing narratives and symbols across society.

Similarly, Fairclough (2015) emphasizes that political discourse is inherently argumentative and multifunctional. Political texts simultaneously represent the world (through discourse), enact social relations (via genres), and construct social identities (through styles). Tools such as metaphor and narrative framing do not merely describe reality—they shape it, framing

specific policy options while obscuring others. In this light, the representation of the Other in foreign policy discourse is a rhetorical act, deeply tied to strategies of justification and power reproduction. Together, Hansen and Fairclough underscore the importance of a nuanced analysis of how identities are constructed, maintained, and contested through discourse.

Beyond the binary of Self and Other, identity is also constructed along spatial and temporal lines. National security discourse, in particular, exemplifies how identity is constituted through spatial logic: the national community is often portrayed as bounded and secure, contrasted with a threatening, anarchic international environment. Spatial representations—such as the depiction of Taiwan as part of China—play a central role in establishing these boundaries. These constructions extend beyond clearly defined Others like "*Russia*" or "*Israel*" to more abstract spatial imaginaries that underpin foreign policy narratives. Even universalist discourses often mask such constructions while still operating within them (Hansen, 2006).

Equally significant is the temporal dimension of identity. Foreign policy discourse frequently invokes narratives of progress, continuity, transformation, or stasis. These temporal scripts locate the potential for development—whether political, economic, or cultural—within the national space, while characterizing the international realm as regressive or repetitive. As Ole Wæver argues, identity can be constructed not only against a spatial Other but also a temporal Other—for instance, the European Union's identity is often articulated in contrast to its own past rather than to an external adversary.

Finally, foreign policy discourse should be examined across different temporal scales. While poststructuralist analysis often focuses on discourse in response to major events—wars, crises, or conflicts—it is also crucial to explore discursive practices operating in more routine, everyday settings. These "*non-striking*" moments are just as important in understanding how identities and meanings are continually reproduced or gradually transformed.

3.3. Intertextuality

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in discourse analysis, with a particular emphasis on intertextuality within official foreign policy discourse. Following Lene Hansen's "*Model 1*" research design (Hansen, 2006), the analysis focuses on texts produced by political actors who possess the authority to shape and execute foreign policy—such as government officials, diplomats, senior military figures, and leaders of international organizations. The corpus includes speeches, policy documents, interviews, press conferences, and published articles. In line with Hansen's framework, the study investigates not only how these discourses construct national identity but also how they engage with criticism and seek to stabilize meaning through intertextual references. Intertextual connections may be traced either through explicit references made by political leaders themselves or through secondary sources that highlight such links, thereby constructing a narrative of intertextual influence and reinforcing the salience of particular quoted texts.

Intertextuality is understood here as the process by which one text draws upon, responds to, or reshapes other texts. As Hansen notes, these references may be made explicitly—when a political leader quotes or critiques another speech—or may be reconstructed through secondary sources that trace discursive influence. The study considers both explicit intertextual links and more subtle discursive echoes, such as rhetorical patterns or recurring metaphors. Moreover, it distinguishes between intertextuality used to reinforce dominant narratives and that which responds to contestation or crisis, thereby situating discourse within ongoing political struggles.

This analytical framework is enriched by Norman Fairclough's conception of intertextual chains (Fairclough, 2015), which emphasizes that texts are not isolated but belong to broader discursive sequences that evolve over time and across institutional settings. Fairclough's notion of transformational relations between text types—for example, how a government white paper may transform the content of a leader's speech into a formal policy guideline—helps trace how meanings are stabilized, contested, or reinterpreted across genres and platforms. Common discursive elements (e.g., threat framings, identity markers, metaphors) may persist across texts, yet acquire new meanings depending on communicative context or political function. Following Fairclough, the analysis focuses not only on ideational content (what is said about security, identity, the Other) but also on the interpersonal dimension (how relationships of authority, legitimacy, and contestation are constructed through language).

In this way, the study empirically investigates how China constructs its national identity, interests, and security priorities through official discourse. It focuses on the discursive strategies used to frame identity in relation to perceived threats, internal stability, and international order. Emphasis is placed on how China positions itself in contrast to perceived Others—especially Taiwan—and how the image of the United States influences China’s self-representation. The aim is to understand how these constructions legitimize certain security policies or national interests.

The analysis employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), combining Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach—to trace how identity narratives evolve over time and in response to specific events—with Fairclough’s model to explore intertextual chains between primary sources such as political speeches and official documents, and secondary sources including academic articles and media outputs. Given the limitations posed by my lack of proficiency in mandarin, secondary sources were essential in providing context, clarification, and a broader scholarly perspective. This approach not only strengthened the analysis but also emphasized the importance of engaging with diverse academic interpretations to deepen understanding of Chinese discourse.

Intertextuality is also used as a tool to track discursive shifts between different periods of Xi Jinping’s leadership. Through this methodological lens, the study identifies discursive strategies such as binary oppositions (“us” vs. “them”), historical references, and metaphors of threat or harmony. These strategies are key to understanding how China frames its identity, defines its security priorities, and responds to both domestic pressures and international challenges. Ultimately, the research shows how discourse not only reflects but also shapes China’s national interests and legitimizes its policy choices.

Chapitre 2: Contextualization

Defining a singular concept of “*Chinese identity*” presents a significant challenge due to the vast and diverse historical and cultural legacy of China. Far from being fixed, Chinese identity has evolved over centuries, molded by a rich tapestry of dynastic rule, philosophical traditions, foreign invasions, revolutions, and modernization efforts. To fully understand the China of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping—especially the nuances, depth, and continuity in their political discourse—it is crucial to first examine the historical foundations underlying their narratives. This chapter therefore explores key historical events and turning points that have played a pivotal role in shaping and transforming Chinese national identity. Particular focus is placed on enduring foundational themes—such as unity, resistance to foreign domination, and national rejuvenation—that continue to influence both Chinese Communist Party policies and the collective consciousness of the Chinese people. By tracing these historical threads, we gain a clearer understanding of how the past is actively mobilized in the present to shape China’s self-image and its global position, historically as the dominant regional power. This long-held perspective shapes China’s view of its role in the world and continues to guide its interactions with neighboring countries and its foreign policy strategies. Understanding this historical context of China’s self-perception as the center of civilization offers essential insight into how these enduring beliefs continue to drive the country’s ambitions and actions on the international stage.

1. The legacy of the imperial China

In the 15th century, under the rule of the Ming and early Qing dynasties, China was considered one of the most powerful and advanced empires in the world. This period marked the height of the “Middle Kingdom” worldview, in which China perceived itself as the cultural and geographical center of civilization. This self-image was rooted in a sense of superiority over neighboring nations. Technologically and economically, China was far ahead of many other civilizations at the time.

At the heart of Chinese society was Confucianism—a philosophical tradition founded by Confucius. His teachings emphasized a hierarchical worldview in which harmony was achieved not through equality, but through clearly defined roles and respect for social order: the elderly over the young, men over women, rulers over subjects. This focus on hierarchy

would later play a key role in shaping both China's internal governance and its foreign relations (Dian, 2022).

According to Confucian doctrine, the world was organized around a Sino-centric order, where stability depended on a strong, centralized authority. The emperor occupied this central role as the "*Son of Heaven*," ruling "all under heaven" and representing the moral and political center of the civilized world. In this view, civilization was not defined by universal principles but by a society's adherence to Chinese norms, rituals, and traditions, as well as its cultural and geographic proximity to China.

Despite its dominant position, China did not seek to conquer, convert, or forcibly assimilate neighboring peoples. Instead, it expected them to acknowledge its supremacy through the tribute system. Foreign states that offered tribute were considered friendly but always inferior. They were welcome as long as they recognized China's central and superior status—but they could never be seen as equals. Although the empire eventually lagged in military innovation, this was not perceived as problematic at the time, as ideological and cultural dominance was deemed sufficient. This worldview shaped China's foreign relations for centuries and continues to echo in contemporary narratives of national pride and identity (Dian, 2022).

2. The century of Humiliation

The period of great upheaval for China coincided with Europe's Industrial Revolution. Xi Jinping has referred to the era spanning from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century as the "*Century of Humiliation*," during which China suffered a series of challenges stemming from foreign intervention and Western imperialism (Dian, 2022).

The term "humiliation" carries multiple overlapping meanings. Broadly, it evokes a deeply emotional response to being diminished in the eyes of others. Etymologically, from the Latin root *humiliare*, it refers to the experience of being "insulted by a more powerful other" (Strozier and Mart, 2017).

This period left a lasting psychological and political impact on China, shaping its contemporary worldview and intensifying the drive for national rejuvenation. The legacy of foreign domination and internal fragmentation continues to inform China's pursuit of sovereignty and national dignity.

1.1. The Origins of the Century of Humiliation

By the mid-18th century, Europe's Industrial Revolution had propelled it far ahead of China in technological progress and global influence. While European powers rapidly embraced industrial capitalism and expanded their empires, China remained rooted in its traditional systems, widening the developmental gap between the two. Initially, many trade routes dominated by Western empires had been established and managed by Chinese actors. However, for Confucian elites in China, the growing presence of foreign powers in East Asia appeared both threatening and destabilizing.

Western ideas, goods, and trading systems would take nearly a century—until the late 19th century—to penetrate rural China. This slow diffusion eventually triggered major ideological and political shifts in China, comparable in significance to the spread of Buddhism in the 6th century or the Qing conquest in the 17th century (Westad, 2012).

The turning point came with the Opium War (1839–1842), when British forces clashed with the Qing Empire. China's defeat, formalized in the Treaty of Nanjing, led to the cession of Hong Kong to Britain and exposed the military and institutional weaknesses of the Qing dynasty. In the years that followed, China experienced both internal unrest—such as the Taiping Rebellion—and continued pressure from foreign powers. The Second Opium War (1856–1860) further deepened China's vulnerability, as additional concessions were extracted by Britain and other powers, including Japan.

By 1875, the child emperor Puyi had been named to the throne, although real authority remained with Empress Dowager Cixi, a conservative figurehead resistant to Western influence. Cixi saw Western reforms as a betrayal of Confucian principles and acted to suppress their adoption, including organizing a coup in 1899 (Westad, 2012). Nevertheless, in response to the growing crisis, the Qing initiated the Self-Strengthening Movement (1860–1880), which sought to modernize China's military and economy using Western technologies (Chun & Jue, 2018).

Despite these efforts, Britain remained the dominant foreign power in China, controlling key trading centers such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and parts of Shanghai. However, these trade hubs continued to rely heavily on Chinese infrastructure and labor. Local Chinese networks played a central role in maintaining the commercial systems, even under foreign oversight (Westad, 2012). These developments marked the beginning of what came to be known as China's "*Century of Humiliation*."

1.2. Entering the 20th Century

The 20th century began with further turmoil. On June 21, 1900, the Qing dynasty, under Empress Dowager Cixi, declared war on the foreign powers stationed in Beijing. Cixi supported the Boxer Rebellion, a populist anti-foreign movement led largely by young peasants. The Boxers launched violent attacks across northern China, killing thousands of foreigners and Chinese Christians. In response, an international force of 19,000 troops—primarily from Japan, Russia, Britain, the United States, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy—captured Beijing on August 14, 1900, ending the siege.

As foreign troops looted the capital, the imperial court fled to Xi'an, leaving envoys behind to negotiate. In 1901, the Boxer Protocol was signed, imposing harsh reparations on China and signaling the further erosion of Qing sovereignty (Britannica, 2025).

1.2.1. The Republican Revolution

The Qing dynasty, already weakened by internal dissent and foreign intervention, finally collapsed following Empress Dowager Cixi's death in 1908 and the accession of the child emperor Puyi. The ineffective regency, coupled with growing public frustration, culminated in the 1911 Revolution, sparked by controversy over a railway agreement. On January 1, 1912, Sun Yat-sen declared the founding of the Republic of China in Nanjing (Tertrais, 2015).

Sun soon handed power to Yuan Shikai, who became the first president of the republic. However, Yuan failed to establish stable central governance. After the failed "*Second Revolution*" in 1913, China entered the Warlord Era, marked by regional fragmentation and violence. Despite setbacks, Sun Yat-sen's vision for republicanism—embodied in his "Three Principles of the People"—continued to inspire political movements. In 1920, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) was reorganized and briefly allied with the newly founded Communist Party (1921).

After Sun's death in 1925, Chiang Kai-shek assumed leadership, unifying the South and purging the Communists in 1927. The "*Nanjing Decade*" (1928–1937) marked a period of relative national consolidation, though the Communists were excluded from power. In 1940, Sun Yat-sen was honored as the "Father of the Nation," a title later acknowledged even by Mao Zedong (Tertrais, 2015).

2. The Mao Era

2.1. The Japanese Invasion and the Rise of Maoism

Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, followed by its full-scale war against China in 1937, led to the occupation of major cities and exposed the weaknesses of the Nationalist government. While the Nationalists retreated inland, forming a united front with the Communists, their coercive methods—including forced conscription—alienated rural populations (Serfass, 2016).

The Chinese Communist Party, under Mao Zedong, capitalized on this by offering social reforms, land redistribution, and responsive leadership in the countryside. By building local institutions and empowering peasants, the CCP gained ground, especially in northern China (Fairbank, 2013).

After Japan's defeat in 1945, civil war resumed. Despite American support, the Nationalists were unable to compete with the CCP's guerrilla tactics and deep rural base. In 1949, the Communists claimed victory, forcing Chiang Kai-shek and his government to flee to Taiwan (Fairbank, 2013).

2.2. The Kuomintang in Taiwan

Taiwan, under Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945, had developed differently from the mainland. When the Nationalists took over after World War II, they were seen not as liberators, but as corrupt occupiers. A peaceful protest in February 1947 escalated into a brutal crackdown, resulting in mass civilian casualties and years of repression (Fairbank, 2013).

After retreating to Taiwan in 1949, Chiang's regime faced economic and political instability. Nevertheless, Taiwan gradually rebuilt, expanding education with help from mainland scholars and American missionaries. Institutions like National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica became centers of knowledge, while an increasing number of Taiwanese studied abroad.

With strong U.S. support during the Cold War, Taiwan remained a strategic partner and continued to claim legitimacy as the government of all China, despite its diminished territorial control (Fairbank, 2013).

2.3. The People's Republic of China Under Mao Zedong

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP consolidated power through ideological campaigns, economic reforms, and mass mobilization. Early successes included inflation control, nationalization, land redistribution, and the launch of literacy and marriage law reforms.

The Korean War (1950–1953) played a critical role in unifying the country and bolstering CCP legitimacy. Mao launched campaigns like the “*Three-Anti*” and “*Five-Anti*” movements to eliminate corruption and capitalist influence. However, the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), aimed at rapid collectivization and industrialization, resulted in disaster. Poor planning and coercive policies led to widespread famine and the deaths of millions.

Following this failure, Mao's authority waned but was revived through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Designed to purge perceived bourgeois elements, the movement mobilized youth into Red Guards who attacked intellectuals, officials, and cultural institutions. The resulting chaos destabilized society and devastated China's heritage.

Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s, leaving China isolated. This prompted a shift in foreign policy. In 1972, President Nixon's visit to China symbolized a dramatic opening to the West, helping China counterbalance Soviet power and re-enter the international arena.

One major outcome of U.S. recognition of the PRC was Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. The island lost its UN seat and access to international institutions, while the PRC gained global legitimacy.

By the time of Mao's death in 1976, the country was exhausted. Years of ideological purges and failed policies had left deep societal scars. The stage was set for a new era of reform and modernization as China began to move beyond the revolutionary fervor of the Mao years (Fairbank, 2013).

3. Deng Xiaoping: Era of Reforms

3.1. The End of Mao and the Rise of Deng Xiaoping

After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China was left isolated, impoverished, predominantly rural, and politically unstable. Deng Xiaoping soon emerged as the paramount leader and began steering the country toward profound economic and social reforms. Unlike previous periods marked by dramatic upheaval, Deng's approach was pragmatic and experimental, often responding to grassroots initiatives rather than adhering to a rigid ideological blueprint (Fairbank, 2013).

3.1.1. Economic Reforms and Rural Transformation (Late 1970s–1980s)

Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing throughout the 1980s, China underwent rapid economic transformation. Deng's policies dismantled the collective farming system, allowing millions of peasants to return to family-based agriculture. The slogan "*to get rich is glorious*" encouraged the development of private enterprises (getihu), typically small, family-run businesses focused on retail and services. Many entrepreneurs adopted a "collective" status for their businesses to access local government support, land, resources, and financing—often forming alliances with local officials.

This period also saw a significant acceleration of rural industrialization. Enterprises initially launched during the Great Leap Forward expanded considerably, producing consumer goods for both domestic and international markets. The opening of the economy and the decentralization of power fostered vibrant local economies, particularly in southeastern coastal regions, boosted by investments from overseas Chinese, Taiwanese businesspeople, and Western and Japanese firms.

These economic reforms brought social changes: urbanization increased, living standards improved, and new opportunities for wealth and mobility emerged. The number of Chinese living below the poverty line dropped dramatically—from 250 million in 1978 to 30 million by 2005, according to official estimates. These transformations were supported by rising literacy rates, increased life expectancy, and improvements in the status of women.

3.1.3. Political Developments and the Tiananmen Exception (1989)

Despite the general absence of mass violence, the post-Mao era was not entirely free of turmoil. In stark contrast to earlier decades—when the 1949 revolution cost an estimated one to two million landlord lives, the Great Leap Forward resulted in the deaths of around 30 million peasants from famine, and the Cultural Revolution led to half a million deaths or suicides and the persecution of nearly 100 million people—Deng’s reforms were largely peaceful.

A major exception occurred with the violent military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in June 1989. Estimates suggest that between 800 and 1,300 people were killed, and 10,000 to 30,000 were imprisoned. Political dissidents and unauthorized religious groups continued to face persecution. However, aside from these notable instances, the post-Mao revolution unfolded without the widespread repression and chaos characteristic of the Maoist era.

3.2. The Jiang Zemin Era and Institutional Challenges (1990s–Early 2000s)

By the 1990s, economic ties between mainland China and Taiwan were strengthening, and the southeast coast had become one of the most dynamic regions in Asia. In 2001, Jiang Zemin introduced the “Three Represents” theory, redefining the Communist Party as representing the most advanced culture, the most advanced productive forces, and the broad majority of the Chinese people. This ideological shift allowed newly wealthy entrepreneurs to be officially integrated into the Party.

Deng Xiaoping’s death in February 1997 marked a pivotal moment. Although Deng and his followers had established certain procedures and norms, these were not sufficiently institutionalized to replace the personal authority he had wielded. However, since Jiang Zemin and his colleagues had already been leading the party-state for nearly eight years by that point, there was no power vacuum. Nonetheless, Deng’s passing exposed the fragility of the party-state’s institutional framework.

The changes of the post-Mao era were as revolutionary as those of the Maoist period, but they were implemented with greater pragmatism and sensitivity to the population’s needs. The reforms brought profound transformation without the chaos and famine that had plagued China in previous decades. Overall, the post-Mao transformation stands out for its rapid economic

growth, dramatic social change, and relative stability extending into the 20th century and the Hu Jintao presidency.

Chapter 3: Hu Jintao's Administration

Hu Jintao's political ascent in the late 1990s marked a pivotal shift in China's leadership. As Ewing (2003) notes, Hu rose from relative obscurity to succeed Jiang Zemin, not through traditional power bases, but rather through his expertise in ideological affairs and personnel management. His pragmatic approach to international relations—particularly with the United States—combined cooperative engagement with strategic caution.

The Taiwan issue remained a central challenge: while Hu maintained Beijing's firm opposition to Taiwanese independence and condemned U.S. arms sales to the island, he also demonstrated greater flexibility in cross-Strait dialogue, signaling a willingness to engage more constructively with Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party.

Hu's cautious political style reflected Deng Xiaoping's guiding principle to "*hide your strength and bide your time*," emphasizing strategic restraint and internal stability (Geis & Holt, 2009). As Cabestan (2010) observes, Hu sought to reassert ideological orthodoxy while simultaneously reassuring the international community about China's rise, thus laying the foundation for a so-called "*peaceful ascent*."

The 16th Party Congress in 2002 formalized Hu's leadership in a rare transition that occurred without the direct influence of the party's founding generation. During this period, Hu navigated internal party reforms and mounting external challenges, including recurring cross-Strait tensions and strained relations with the United States (Cheng, 2005).

In this chapter, we will begin by analyzing official discourse to identify the narrative shaping China's internal identity under the Hu Jintao administration. This first section will help us better understand the ideological foundations and national self-perception promoted during this period. Our analysis will be based primarily on key speeches, including those delivered at the 17th, 18th Party Congresses and at the speech at the CCP's 90 anniversary. In the second part, we will turn to China's external identity. We will first examine China's relations with the United States during the Bush and Obama administrations, based on extracts from official speeches as well as Chinese media sources such as *China Daily* to better grasp how the Chinese leadership framed its position on key international issues. Finally, we will focus on cross-Strait relations, comparing China's approach toward Taiwan under the two administrations of Chen Shui-bian

and Ma Ying-jeou. We aim to understand the Chinese perspective on these evolving relationships and analyze the strategies deployed to maintain its vision of national unity and sovereignty.

1. Internal Identity

In analyzing Hu Jintao's rhetoric during his presidency, one of the most prominent themes is the concept of a "*Harmonious Society*," which became a central guiding principle of China's domestic and international development strategy (Hu Jintao, 2007, 2011 and 2012). Introduced at the beginning of Hu's presidency, this concept marked a clear shift in rhetorical strategy—moving away from antagonistic, class-based narratives toward a discourse emphasizing unity, collective identity, and shared values. As Fairclough (2015) notes, such framing fosters cohesion rather than division. Hu sought to portray the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as intrinsically connected to the people, much like a family leader concerned with the collective well-being, a metaphorical approach highlighted by Mugur (2016). This narrative enabled the Party to acknowledge its shortcomings while reinforcing legitimacy through care and responsibility.

Hu's discourse reframed socialism to prioritize modernization, inclusiveness, and social equity over class struggle. As Geis and Holt (2009) describe, this rhetorical shift—termed a "*Great Leap Leftward*"—was institutionalized at the 17th Party Congress, where slogans such as "*putting people first*" and "*harmonious society*" were enshrined in the Party's basic line (Hu Jintao, 2007). This vision emphasized social stability, moderate political participation, and broader economic opportunity, reinforcing the centralized authority of the CCP while presenting a uniquely Chinese path to development, as Lene Hansen (2006) suggests.

The concept of harmony also extended to Hu's foreign policy vision. His articulation of a "*Harmonious World*" was closely tied to the domestic notion of a "*Harmonious Society*," framing domestic stability and global peace as interlinked. China's foreign policy under Hu emphasized *peaceful development, win-win cooperation, and respect for international norms*—principles rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: *mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence*. Hu's rhetoric (2007 and 2011) framed peace, development, and cooperation not only as China's strategic goals but as a shared destiny for all humanity. According to Geis and Holt (2009), this emphasis on harmony helped

promote political consensus and balanced development at home while positioning China as a responsible actor within an increasingly multipolar, interdependent world.

Throughout his presidency, Hu Jintao also consistently promoted the “*Scientific Outlook on Development*,” a concept that marked a rhetorical shift from an exclusive focus on rapid economic growth to a more holistic approach emphasizing social equity, sustainability, and human-centered development (Geis & Holt, 2009). As Hu (2007) stated, “*The Scientific Outlook on Development takes development as its essence, putting people first as its core*,” thereby redefining the Party’s legitimacy through discursive emphasis on inclusiveness and long-term stability. This rhetorical move aligns with Fairclough’s (2015) idea of fostering cohesion through language, as well as Wodak’s (2013) insight on the importance of historical context in shaping political narratives.

Hu Jintao’s rhetoric played a central role in redefining China’s national identity by weaving together narratives of historical struggle, cultural revival, and controlled political modernization. In his 2011 speech marking the CCP’s anniversary, Hu drew on pivotal historical moments—beginning with the Opium War—to evoke national resilience. Using emotionally charged language like “*our great country*,” “*aggression*,” and “*Chinese struggles*,” he constructed a story of collective hardship and revival, positioning the CCP as the driving force behind China’s resurgence. This discourse deliberately distanced China from narratives of decline and subjugation, asserting instead a future rooted in “*socialism with Chinese characteristics*” rather than Western liberal models.

Central to this vision was a selective reading of the past, one that presented post-1978 reform as the continuation of a long civilizational journey. As Wodak (2013) argues, Hu employed constructive strategies that linked China’s imperial legacy, revolutionary history, and reform era into a unified national trajectory. He emphasized the transformation of productive forces and social structures since 1949, framing these changes as part of a broader mission of national rejuvenation. Terms like “*reform*” and “*culture*” appeared prominently in his discourse, underscoring both economic modernization and the cultural foundations of state legitimacy.

In tandem with development, Hu also cautiously advocated for a model of political participation—referred to as “*Democracy with Chinese Characteristics*”—that involved limited local elections and reflected a tightly controlled yet responsive form of governance. This form of socialist democracy aimed to reinforce the Party’s long-term legitimacy without compromising its central authority.

Amid internal and external challenges—including corruption, legal fragility, environmental degradation, tensions with Taiwan, and skepticism over military modernization, Hu identified cultural development as a unifying force. In his 2007 address, he declared, “Culture is the lifeblood of a nation,” and called for a “common spiritual home for the Chinese nation.” He linked cultural promotion to national belonging, domestic cohesion, and China’s global resurgence, drawing on the “*Middle Kingdom*” symbolism to position China’s rise as a return to its rightful centrality. This vision culminated in the 2011 “*Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues Pertaining to Deepening Reforms of the Cultural System*,” which framed culture as both a vehicle for national self-improvement and a pillar of socialist values (Geis & Holt, 2009; Mugur, 2016; Xing, 2009).

1.2. National Interests

In 2005, Hu Jintao introduced his vision of a “*Harmonious Society*” and called for the establishment of an international system grounded in the rule of law and the principles of the UN Charter. He emphasized the importance of pursuing peaceful development on the global stage as a core tenet of China’s foreign policy.

At China’s 11th Ambassadorial Conference in July 2009—entitled Signals of Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy—Hu urged the Party to continue adhering to Deng Xiaoping’s guiding principles: namely, to “*keep a low profile*” while gradually asserting China’s growing role in international affairs. Although Hu initially pursued a strategy close to his predecessor’s “*great power diplomacy*,” over time he introduced nuanced changes that stressed harmony and diplomatic responsiveness.

As China consolidated its internal foundations through the vision of a Harmonious Society, national interests became more central to both domestic and foreign policy agendas. Since 2002, Chinese authorities have increasingly emphasized not only traditional national interests but also those linked to national development. This evolution is clearly articulated in the 2002 White Paper (Cabestan, 2010).

“China’s national interests constitute the essential foundation of its national defense policy. These interests mainly include: safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and security; continuing to take economic development as the central task and constantly increasing overall national strength; upholding and improving the socialist system;

maintaining and promoting social stability and harmony; establishing a lasting peace in the international environment and creating a favorable climate in China's surrounding regions.

China takes all necessary measures to safeguard its national interests and, at the same time, respects the interests of other countries and supports the peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes between countries through consultation.”

This approach reflected Hu Jintao's dual focus: preserving internal cohesion while fostering cooperative international relations. Recognizing China's ethnic and cultural diversity, the regime constructed national identity by promoting a shared sentiment rooted in a common history and a vision of national rejuvenation. This narrative served to legitimize the Party's efforts to “*save*” the nation from perceived external threats—such as American imperialism or attempts to undermine China's unity.

Importantly, Hu's rhetoric acknowledged the legitimacy of other nations' national interests, recognizing the potential for conflict while favoring peaceful negotiation and multilateralism. This marked a significant discursive shift: China increasingly framed international security not in confrontational terms, but through conciliation and diplomacy. Under Hu's leadership, the pursuit of harmony thus became a cornerstone of both domestic governance and foreign strategy (Cabestan, 2010; Cheng, 2005).

2. External Identity

In the early 2000s, Chinese foreign policy began to integrate discursive concepts aimed at promoting a more peaceful and inclusive vision of global governance. Between 2003 and 2004, notions such as “*harmony*” and “*unity without uniformity*” were incorporated into China's external narrative to present its rise as non-threatening. While the “*peaceful rise*” doctrine itself did not endure as a central slogan, these alternative concepts helped frame China's development as aligned with mutual respect, coexistence, and international stability (Hu Jintao, 2005). As Ruan Zongze, deputy director of the China Institute of International Studies, explained, such *efforts reflect China's aspiration to reduce global conflict and promote peace. This rhetoric draws from deeper philosophical traditions; the concept of “harmony,” for instance, is not a recent political invention but a longstanding element of China's 5,000-year cultural and philosophical heritage* (Embassy of people Republic of China, 2007).

According to Cabestan (2010), when Hu Jintao assumed leadership, China remained careful of the United States' status as a global "*hyperpower*" and questioned the viability of a genuinely peaceful ascent. The 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo was perceived by Chinese leaders as a sign that the U.S. might similarly intervene in support of Taiwan, thereby obstructing China's goal of reunification. In response, the Chinese Communist Party pursued a more cautious and pragmatic diplomatic strategy, often described as one of "*conflict avoidance*." This approach was clearly articulated in the 18th Party Congress report (2012), which emphasized the importance of promoting "*equality, mutual trust, inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutually beneficial cooperation*" in international relations. It further called for the observance of the principles of the UN Charter and insisted on equality among all states—regardless of size, strength, or wealth—as a foundation for international justice.

China supported a multipolarity world as a long-term goal, tried to soften its tone and methods to reduce international suspicion and improve its global image. This strategy marked a shift toward an indirect strategy, reflecting an awareness of China's real power limitations in comparison to the United States. Although China wanted to be portrayed as a revisionist actor, intent on reshaping the international order, its foreign policy also included clear efforts at integration into the global community. Going forward, for China it became essential to highlight this integrative dimension over confrontation. In the following of these international policies, Beijing decided to adopt a more restrained position on Taiwan.

For many years following the end of the Cold War, China held a somewhat paradoxical perception of its security. On one hand, most Chinese officials believed that the country was benefiting from a particularly favorable and stable international context: no major power posed a threat to China, its political system, or its development trajectory; its land borders were increasingly acknowledged, and no aggressive neighbor endangered them. With a peaceful external environment, China could focus on economic growth and consolidating its global influence. On the other hand, these same leaders and experts identified a number of pressing security concerns—chief among them, the Taiwan issue and the strategic presence of the United States (Cabestan, 2010).

2.1. Security through the lens of Chinese identity

Since 1982, the principle of independence has remained a cornerstone of China's foreign policy. Each Party Congress and government report to the National People's Congress has reaffirmed China's adherence to an "*independent foreign policy of peace*". China's definition of "*independence*" is nuanced and multifaceted, shaped by its historical experiences and strategic priorities (Li, 2009).

Hu frequently described China's security environment as complex, characterized by both emerging opportunities and persistent challenges. Opportunities included China's growing economic power, its integration into global markets, improved ties with neighboring countries, and greater influence in international institutions. Nevertheless, challenges such as territorial disputes, energy security concerns, and the risk of domestic unrest remained significant.

Under Hu's leadership, the military and security apparatus continued to prioritize a robust defense posture and the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This military modernization reflected China's commitment to defending its sovereignty and protecting its core interests—particularly in the South China Sea and regarding the objective of reunification with Taiwan (Li, 2009).

Despite promoting cooperation, China under Hu remained assertive in defending its sovereignty and national interests as we can see in his discourse at the United Nations in 2005. This assertiveness was evident in its handling of territorial disputes and responses to perceived threats to domestic stability. Hu's foreign policy sought to balance collaboration with strategic assertiveness, reflecting China's emergence as a major power with expanding global interests).

While portraying China as a responsible stakeholder in the international system, Hu simultaneously emphasized the country's right to follow its own development path and safeguard its legitimate interests (Hu Jintao, 2005). This dual posture helped define China's external identity during his tenure—one that blended cooperation with cautious competition in its interactions with other major powers (Li, 2009).

2.2. Relationship with the US

The evolution of U.S.-China relations has been significantly influenced by conflicting perspectives on power dynamics, regional influence, and national sovereignty—particularly in relation to Taiwan. From a Chinese strategic standpoint, the United States is viewed not merely as a global superpower, but as an actor determined to preserve its unipolar dominance, often to the detriment of China’s national interests and regional aspirations.

Chinese analysts frequently interpret the sustained U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific, alongside its continued support for Taiwan, as components of a broader containment strategy aimed at limiting China’s rise as a global power (Li, 2009).

2.2.1. The Role of the United States in China’s Identity Construction

Over the past few decades, the United States has consistently portrayed China as a strategic threat, framing its rise as a challenge to the liberal international order. Turner (2014) argues that U.S. political and media discourse has long cast China as an adversarial and untrustworthy actor, shaping both public perception and foreign policy. James Mann echoes this assessment, highlighting how American narratives often emphasize China’s expanding military capabilities, presenting it as a potential threat to U.S. global leadership and stability (Turner, 2014).

Since January 1, 1979, U.S.-Taiwan relations have remained unofficial, regulated by the Taiwan Relations Act, which provides the legal foundation for continued engagement with Taiwan following the normalization of diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Despite the absence of formal recognition, the Act ensures ongoing commercial, cultural, and security exchanges between the United States and Taiwan (Li, 2009).

The perception of China as a threat intensified after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, a watershed moment that profoundly altered American views of the Chinese Communist Party. By the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics—underscored by President George W. Bush’s attendance at the opening ceremony—China’s emergence as a major global power was firmly established. The growing perception of a narrowing power gap between the U.S. and China began to reshape strategic thinking in Washington, generating both anxiety and acknowledgment among American policymakers.

Joseph Nye offers a critical perspective on this so-called “China threat theory,” arguing that it constitutes a socially constructed narrative rather than an objective reality. Nye warns that treating China as a threat may, paradoxically, help to create one—a self-fulfilling prophecy. He contends that much of the threat perception is rooted in American identity and insecurity, rather than in China’s actual behavior. The proliferation of popular and scholarly literature reinforcing this narrative has further entrenched the image of China as a systemic rival. Similarly, Robert Kaplan underscores this strategic framing, asserting that “*the American military contest with China in the Pacific will define the twenty-first century,*” emphasizing how rivalry with China has become embedded in U.S. foreign policy discourse (Turner, 2014).

The Reagan administration’s support for Taiwan exemplifies the identity-driven logic that has informed U.S. policy. By backing Taiwan’s democratic development while refraining from formal diplomatic recognition, Washington crafted a space in which it could uphold its values—such as the defense of freedom—without overtly violating its commitment to the One China policy. As Manicom (2007) notes, this dual-track strategy has heavily influenced cross-strait relations. From Beijing’s perspective, American affirmations of the One China principle appear disingenuous in light of continued arms sales and unofficial security ties with Taipei, which aggravate strategic mistrust.

The Obama administration adopted a more nuanced position. In 2007, then-candidate Obama described China as “*neither an enemy nor a friend,*” characterizing it instead as a “*competitor.*” After assuming office, he revised this rhetoric, referring to China as a “*strategic competitor*” and initiating the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue with President Hu Jintao. This initiative reflected a broader recognition that long-term U.S. interests might be better served through engagement rather than confrontation—even as structural rivalry continued to define the bilateral relationship (Li, 2009).

2.2.2. China's Discursive Position Toward the US

As Hu Jintao assumed power, China was increasingly conscious of being perceived by the United States as a rising strategic competitor. While China's economic and military capabilities were still developing, its regional dominance was becoming clear (Vermander, 2009). In response, Chinese authorities in the early 2000s adopted a strategy of “*conflict avoidance*” aimed at easing international concerns. This approach was marked by more measured rhetoric and an emphasis on cooperation. Qian Qichen captured this shift as a transition from “*struggle against hegemonism*” to “*international cooperation.*” At the 2004 Bo'ao Forum, Wang Jisi acknowledged China's growing strength but stressed the considerable gap with the United States, arguing that China was far from being able to challenge American power: “*The gap remains far wider than that between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union*” (Li, 2009).

Hu Jintao placed the Taiwan issue at the center of Sino-U.S. relations, repeatedly tying it to questions of sovereignty and territorial integrity. He reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to “*peaceful reunification*” under the “*one country, two systems*” model, while firmly opposing any movement toward Taiwan independence. He framed this position as the “*common aspiration and strong determination of 1.3 billion Chinese people,*” and called on the U.S. to respect its commitments and refrain from sending “*wrong signals*” to Taipei (Xinhua, 2004). As Tang Shiping highlights, for Chinese leaders, the issue of Taiwan is deeply tied to national identity—comparable, in symbolic terms, to the value that Americans place on democracy and freedom. Reunification is seen not only as a political objective but as a pillar of China's “**grand strategy**” and a precondition for the full realization of its sovereignty (Li, 2009).

This stance is further shaped by profound mistrust toward U.S. intentions. Many Chinese analysts contend that the U.S. uses Taiwan as a strategic lever to constrain China, particularly through arms sales and political support. During the Bush administration, U.S. backing for Taiwan became more explicit, a shift perceived in China as moving from a policy of “*strategic ambiguity*” to “*strategic clarity,*” which exacerbated Beijing's security concerns (Li, 2009).

At its core, this growing rivalry reflects a clash of strategic visions. The United States seeks to uphold its global leadership by maintaining a liberal international order, while China criticizes this order as hegemonic. The term “*hegemonism*” is often used by Chinese officials and scholars to characterize U.S. foreign policy, pointing to its perceived unilateralism and double standards.

Under Hu, Chinese diplomacy grew more assertive. Beijing expanded its conception of national security to encompass broader geopolitical threats, especially in maritime areas (Cabestan, 2010). China also sought to diversify its global partnerships in order to counterbalance U.S. influence, promote multipolarity, and reduce reliance on U.S.-dominated institutions (Li, 2009). From Beijing's perspective, U.S. support for Taiwan is closely tied to its desire to maintain influence in the Western Pacific and secure key maritime routes.

This strategic tension was evident in 2008, when the Bush administration approved a \$6.5 billion arms deal with Taiwan. In response, China suspended military exchanges with the U.S. in protest (China Daily, 2009). Despite such confrontations, Chinese officials consistently emphasized the value of stable and constructive relations. In a 2006 speech, Hu highlighted positive developments in bilateral ties and advocated for "*mutually beneficial cooperation.*" He encouraged both sides to resolve trade disputes through dialogue, improve market access, and protect intellectual property, stressing the importance of communication in promoting balanced global growth Ministry of Foreign Affairs (The People's Republic of China, 2006).

Taiwan remained a core issue into the Obama administration. Beijing urged Washington to halt arms sales to Taiwan as a condition for further military cooperation. In official statements, Chinese leaders also reaffirmed the importance of Tibet and Taiwan in safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Xiaohuo and Kuang, 2009; Xiaokun and Yang, 2010). Nevertheless, U.S. arms deal with Taiwan and meetings with figures like the Dalai Lama continued.

Hu Jintao consistently advocated for a Sino-American relationship built on the principles of equality, mutual respect, and non-interference, in accordance with the United Nations Charter. While acknowledging that differences were inevitable, he called for greater consultation and common ground. By reiterating the "*One China*" principle within this framework of equal partnership, China sought to legitimize its core interests while reframing the bilateral relationship as one of reciprocal respect and cooperation (Wodak, 2013).

2.3. Relationship with Taiwan

2.3.1. Official Discourse on Cross-Strait Relations

As announced in the previous chapter, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan remains a highly sensitive and central issue in Chinese foreign policy. Under Hu Jintao's leadership, China introduced a more peaceful and cooperative tone, promoting "*peaceful development*" across the Taiwan Strait. Hu aimed to highlight the shared cultural and familial ties between China and Taiwan. He often described the two sides as "*flesh-and-blood brothers*," emphasizing a common identity and future (Embassy of people republic of China inf the United States of America, 2005). This metaphor was used repeatedly to stress unity beyond political differences (Pan, 2007).

Hu regularly referred to people in Taiwan as "*Taiwan compatriots*" instead of "*Taiwanese*," in an effort to deny a separate national identity and reinforce the idea that everyone on both sides of the Strait is Chinese (AP Archives, 2015). This rhetorical strategy aimed to create a sense of shared identity while delegitimizing pro-independence views. Although Hu's message seemed conciliatory, it was part of a larger strategy to bring Taiwan closer to China without making political concessions. For example, Hu avoided mentioning the "*1992 Consensus*" in its flexible version—"*One China, different interpretations*"—and instead promoted a stricter version of the One China policy (Jamestown Foundation, 2009).

This more rigid approach reduced diplomatic space, especially for pro-independence voices in Taiwan, while still trying to appeal to the broader population.

According to Rex Li (2008), maintaining the One China policy is a core objective of the Chinese leadership. Hu avoided setting deadlines or specific plans for reunification. Instead, he promoted "*peaceful development*" as an open-ended process, which allowed China to maintain its strong position while encouraging gradual cooperation. This strategy involved several tools: strengthening economic ties, increasing Taiwan's isolation in international organizations, and promoting people-to-people exchanges. Li also notes that Hu avoided direct confrontation with the US over its arms sales to Taiwan. Instead, he presented the Taiwan issue as a domestic matter, trying to prevent it from becoming an international topic.

Hu Jintao was clear about China's stance. In a speech marking the 30th anniversary of China's first peaceful outreach to Taiwan, he said, "*We once again call for more negotiations under the One-China policy to formally end hostility between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, to achieve a peaceful agreement, and to build a framework for peaceful development across the*

Strait.” This statement made it clear that China would always see Taiwan as part of its territory (AP Archives, 2015).

From a constructivist point of view, scholars like Tang Shiping (2000) argue that Taiwan is essential to Chinese national identity. Without Taiwan, China’s identity would be incomplete. As Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) explain, national interests are shaped by identity, which helps us understand why Chinese leaders are so committed to reunification—even if it risks future conflict.

Other scholars, such as Glaser and Medeiros, point out internal debates within China about how peaceful its rise should appear. Some Chinese elites, especially in the Foreign Ministry and the People’s Liberation Army, worry that focusing too much on peaceful language could weaken China’s ability to deter threats and slow down its military development. This concern reflects the ideas of offensive realism, particularly those of Mearsheimer, who argues that great powers always seek more power to survive (Li, 2009).

Hu’s speeches often used emotional and symbolic language—like references to “*shared dignity and glory*” or the need for the Chinese people to resolve problems peacefully—to promote national unity. At the same time, he strongly condemned any moves toward independence, portraying them as threats not only to peace in the Taiwan Strait but also to the interests of all 1.3 billion Chinese people (Li, 2009). This dual approach—embracing “*compatriots*” while condemning “*separatists*”—was meant to strengthen nationalism both within China and among people in Taiwan. “*We absolutely cannot allow anyone or any force to separate Taiwan from China by any means,*” Hu said at a party held in Beijing by the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Xinhua, 2005).

Finally, Hu used new diplomatic phrases like “*two shores, one China*” to encourage cross-Strait dialogue without compromising on sovereignty. This echoed F). By encouraging Taiwan to take part in China’s economic development and presenting these ties as beneficial for both sides, Hu hoped to create an interdependence that would gradually bring Taiwan closer to China (Cheng, 2005).

2.3.2. Policy Making toward Taiwan

By 2003, tensions between Taiwan and Beijing remained high, with Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) member Chen Shui-bian serving as Taiwan's president. During his first term, Chen had already provoked Chinese distrust—particularly following his 2002 remark that Taiwan might “*walk its own road*” if goodwill was not reciprocated by China (Dagdag, 2004). Concerned about a possible move toward formal independence should Chen be re-elected, Beijing recognized the need to recalibrate its approach.

Ding (2009) notes that this strategic shift stemmed partly from the failure of earlier coercive tactics. Military exercises and harsh rhetoric had not deterred Taiwan's leadership and instead fueled a sense of Taiwanese nationalism. The situation escalated further in 2003 when Chen proposed a referendum on Taiwan's sovereignty. This development pushed Beijing to prioritize deterring independence over pursuing immediate reunification. A pivotal moment came with the passage of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which provided legal justification for using “*non-peaceful means*” if Taiwan declared independence. Wu Bangguo, then chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, emphasized that while the law underscored China's commitment to peaceful reunification, it also clarified the consequences of secession (Embassy News, 2005). According to Hsieh (2009), the law implicitly recognized Taiwan's separate status at that time, signaling a shift from rigid “*one China*” rhetoric toward a more deterrence-oriented approach.

This legislation allowed Beijing to maintain pressure on the Chen administration. In a 2008 address, Chen cited the presence of more than 1,300 missiles aimed at Taiwan. While Hu Jintao continued to advocate for peaceful negotiations, military threats remained an essential—albeit less publicly emphasized—part of China's strategy (Ding, 2009). Despite tactical adjustments, Beijing's overarching goal of reunification under the “*one China*” principle persisted.

A significant geopolitical shift occurred with the 2008 election of Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Ma Ying-jeou. Ma's endorsement of the “*1992 consensus*” and recognition of the “*one China*” principle opened the door for renewed cross-Strait engagement. In a speech marking the 30th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, Hu Jintao presented six points to guide future relations: reaffirming the “*one China*” principle, strengthening trade ties, promoting cultural and people-to-people exchanges, allowing Taiwan to participate in international organizations, and pursuing a peace agreement. Yu Keli described this framework as a “*guiding blueprint*” for peaceful development (China Times, 2009). Under Ma's leadership, Taiwan swiftly signed economic agreements with China, including the Economic

Cooperation Framework Agreement, which Hu praised as a milestone in peaceful cross-Strait development.

Ma's administration significantly deepened economic ties through trade agreements, direct transportation links, and increased exchanges. However, the issue of sovereignty remained unresolved. Beijing's strategy under Ma shifted toward fostering economic integration without offering political concessions. While it acknowledged Taiwan's distinct political and legal systems, China continued to frame eventual unification as inevitable. According to Matsuda (2017), Ma's conciliatory stance helped stabilize relations and allowed Beijing to refine its approach. Efforts were made to institutionalize cross-Strait ties, but core sovereignty claims remained unchanged.

Meanwhile, expanded social and cultural contact contributed to the emergence of a stronger Taiwanese identity, influencing public opinion on both sides of the Strait. Ding (2009) argues that Beijing's deepening of economic ties was a calculated effort to weaken the pro-independence movement and promote gradual unification. Yet, as reports from 2011 indicated, China continued to upgrade its missile deployments near Taiwan, underscoring that military deterrence remained a constant backdrop.

To conclude this chapter, Hu Jintao's leadership was marked by a clear effort to connect domestic stability with a peaceful approach to international relations. His main ideas, the "*Harmonious Society*" and the "*Scientific Outlook on Development*," focused on promoting social unity, inclusiveness, and steady modernization within China. This domestic vision influenced China's foreign policy, which emphasized peaceful development, cooperation with other countries, and respect for sovereignty, aiming to show that China's rise was not a threat. The approach to Taiwan reflected this balance: the issue was handled firmly to protect sovereignty and national unity, but with some flexibility to maintain internal stability. At the same time, cultural revival and controlled political participation were used to strengthen national identity and the legitimacy of the Communist Party. Overall, Hu's era represents an effort to carefully balance internal cohesion with a more cooperative and responsible role on the world stage. Building on the foundations laid during the Hu Jintao era, the following chapter will examine how Xi Jinping's administration has reshaped China's national identity and political priorities, marking an evolution towards a more assertive and ambitious vision on both domestic and international fronts.

Chapter 4: Xi Jinping's Administration

The political discourse of contemporary China has undergone significant transformation under the leadership of Xi Jinping, whose rise to power marked a turning point in the ideological trajectory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The era of Hu Jintao was characterized by the “*Scientific Outlook on Development*,” which emphasized “*putting people first*” and building a “*harmonious society*” (Guo Xing, 2009). These concepts were primarily employed to stabilize the Party’s legitimacy in a rapidly modernizing society and reflected a careful balancing act between socialist legacies and emerging governance priorities.

In contrast, Xi Jinping’s administration introduced a more assertive and centralized vision centered on the idea of national rejuvenation. His articulation of the “*China Dream*” in 2012 marked a sharp ideological shift—more forceful and less conciliatory. As Angela Poh and Mingjiang Li (2017) argue, this new narrative not only emphasized the “*great renewal of the Chinese nation*” but also signaled the return of strongman politics and a departure from Deng Xiaoping’s more restrained foreign policy. Xi’s leadership has since been defined by a deeper concentration of power, increased ideological control, and a renewed emphasis on national strength, both domestically and on the global stage.

This chapter focuses on the Xi Jinping administration and its evolving approach to cross-Strait relations, analyzed in the context of the two presidential terms of Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan. The first section examines Xi Jinping’s rhetoric and its role in shaping Chinese national identity. The second section explores China’s external identity by analyzing its relationship with the United States under the Obama and Trump administrations. The final section addresses cross-Strait dynamics, focusing on both the discursive strategies employed by Beijing and the concrete actions taken toward achieving reunification with Taiwan.

1. Internal Identity

1.1. Chinese dream

When Xi Jinping was appointed as the next leader at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, his political discourse reflected a more confident and assertive Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He was clear about his vision for China's future: *"Our responsibility is to unite and lead people of the entire party and of all ethnic groups around the country while accepting the baton of history and continuing to work for realising the great revival of the Chinese nation in order to let the Chinese nation stand more firmly and powerfully among all nations around the world and make a greater contribution to mankind."* (BBC News, 2012).

In November 2012, Xi visited the exhibition *"The Road Toward Renewal"* at the National Museum of China, where he proclaimed that "to realize the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history." This marked the first reference to what would become one of the most iconic and enduring slogans of the Xi era: the *"China Dream"*; Xi described this dream as *"the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people"* and the *"shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation"* (He & Tang, 2024). The *"China Dream"* is emblematic of Xi's broader political vision—a nationalist, emotionally charged project aimed at achieving the *"great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."*

Much like his predecessor, Hu Jintao, Xi emphasized national unity and the emergence of a powerful, harmonious China. However, where Hu's approach was more technocratic, Xi adopted a more ideological and symbolic rhetoric. His discourse represents what De Cillia, Reisingl, and Wodak (1999) term constructive strategies of *"perpetuation"*—reproducing national identity not as an objective reality, but as a continuous, emotionally grounded narrative. At the 2014 Central Conference on Ethnic Affairs, Xi stressed the need to cultivate a *"strong sense of community for the Chinese nation,"* asserting that ethnic unity depends on shared cultural identity and emotional bonds. This marked a shift in ethnic policy—from recognizing diversity to promoting a unified national identity under the broader concept of the Chinese nation. The second-generation ethnic policy, aligned with the China Dream, prioritizes assimilation and *"ethnic mingling,"* aiming to integrate all groups in the pursuit of collective prosperity and development. A vivid display of the China Dream's symbolic power was seen during the CCP's centenary celebration on July 1, 2021.

The China Dream also introduces new strategic goals: building a “*moderately prosperous society in all respects*” and establishing a “strong, affluent, civilized, and harmonious socialist modern country” by 2049 (Xi Jinping, 2021) (Poh & Li, 2017). It revolves around the ideology of a “*community of shared destiny*.” At the 100th anniversary of the CCP, Xi evoked both China’s civilizational greatness and its traumatic history:

“With a history of more than 5,000 years, China has made indelible contributions to the progress of human civilization. After the Opium War of 1840, however, China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society and suffered greater ravages than ever before... Since that time, national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.” (Xi Jinping, 2021)

Xi’s discourse emphasized that the CCP’s century-long struggle and achievements have been driven by a singular mission: to seek happiness for the Chinese people and realize the great rejuvenation of the nation. This ideological narrative portrays history as moving inevitably toward China’s return to global prominence. Xi’s emphasis on civilizational greatness and moral leadership surpasses Hu Jintao’s vision, casting China not only as powerful, but righteous. His rhetoric also revives Confucian ideas and emphasizes civilizational uniqueness—suggesting, as Hansen (2008) notes, a belief that China is “*different from the Others*,” and, in some aspects, “*superior*.”

The significance of the China Dream lies not only in its content but also in its form and emotional resonance. Xi’s ambitions—national rejuvenation, global power, and social unity—are heavily featured in elite discourse and state propaganda. As Kerry Brown (2024) argues, the China Dream evokes “*pride, confidence, hope, and expectation verging on excitement*.” Drawing on Castells’ theory of “*feeling determining acting*,” Brown explains how emotionally charged narratives like the China Dream foster pride and a sense of national belonging. This marks a departure from the rational, developmental tone of the Hu Jintao era.

Under Xi, emotions are used strategically. Language serves not only to communicate ideology but to shape how people feel about China’s place in the world and their role in its progress. In Xi’s China, it is no longer sufficient for citizens to know the country is thriving—they must feel it. “*We will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who tries to do so will find their head broken and blood flowing against a Great Wall of Steel built with the flesh and blood of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people.*” This emotionalization of

discourse constructs legitimacy through a form of managed nationalism, synchronizing belief, identity, and emotion (Brown, 2022).

This strategy has deep intellectual roots in the work of Wang Huning, the Party's chief ideologue. As Brown (2024) notes, Wang began promoting identity-based slogans and ideological "memes" in the 1990s. These were not mere expressions of cultural pride, but tools of political communication designed to inspire a deep emotional connection to being Chinese. The current ideological campaign under Xi continues and intensifies this approach. Xi's rhetoric, blending rationality with emotionally charged terms like "*struggle*" (斗争), "*sacrifice*" (牺牲), "*humiliation*" (国耻), and "*pride*" (自豪), reflects a shift toward affective political communication. Emotional identification with the Party and the China Dream becomes essential for political understanding and national cohesion.

In a speech marked by confidence and symbolism, Xi proclaimed that the CCP had "*delivered modernity on its own terms*," presenting China not merely as an equal global actor, but as a superior one. The China Dream invites all citizens to see themselves as part of a collective journey toward prosperity and strength, making the dream inclusive and tangible: "*the dream of the country and the nation, but also of every ordinary Chinese*" (China News, 2013). Xi frequently employs the collective "*we*," fusing the Party's destiny with the nation's and projecting a future in which past suffering gives way to dignity and greatness.

The China Dream also plays a pivotal role in China's foreign policy discourse. Under Xi, Chinese diplomacy increasingly invokes both the China Dream and the idea of a "*community of common destiny*" to articulate its global ambitions. These rhetorical tools mark a shift toward a more assertive and aspirational narrative, positioning China's rise not only as a national success but as a model for global development. Although rooted in themes of economic modernization and geopolitical ascent, the China Dream is emotionally resonant—carefully crafted to link personal pride with collective achievement and national glory.

1.2. The great Rejuvenation

Under Xi Jinping, the idea of the “*great rejuvenation*” of the Chinese nation has become the central narrative organizing both domestic and foreign policy. This concept is deeply intertwined with emotional and historical discourse, strategic positioning, and the reframing of China’s global identity. As noted earlier, this rejuvenation project combines assertive diplomacy with historical narrative to create what is described as a “*carrot-and-stick*” strategy that differentiates China from Western liberal models. At its core, it aims to restore a sense of civilizational greatness while legitimizing the CCP’s vision for China’s future global role (Poh & Li, 2017).

Xi’s rhetoric (2012, 2021) often recalls the “*Century of Humiliation,*” as mostly highlights at the CCP’s century “*The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to great pain, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness. Since that time, national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.*” As Xi Jiping is using collective memory as a mobilizing tool to frame China’s rise as both a historical correction and a moral imperative. This narrative justifies a shift from Deng Xiaoping’s “*keep a low profile*” strategy to what some scholars call a “*new diplomacy,*” wherein China not only asserts its interests, including by military means if needed, but also presents an alternative vision of international order based on harmony, mutual respect, and non-alignment (Poh & Li, 2017). This dual message-with peaceful development on one hand and forceful defense of core interests on the other-forms a grand strategy programmed toward reshaping regional and global dynamics. It positions China as a civilizational state reclaiming its rightful place after a prolonged period of historical injustice.

Together, these elements show that the concept of “*Great rejuvenation*” is more than a developmental goal-it is a comprehensive ideological project. It integrates emotional narratives, historical memory, strategic diplomacy, and cultural revival into a coherent framework that supports the legitimacy of the Party and Xi’s personal leadership on both the domestic and global stage.

2. External Identity

Since the 2008–09 global financial crisis, many Chinese elites have come to believe that China had gained strategic and economic ground over Western powers. This belief opened the door for Beijing to assert itself more confidently on the global stage by gradually reshaping international norms and institutions to serve its own interests (Poh & Li, 2017). The rise of Xi Jinping, the rapid modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and China’s narrowing economic gap with the United States reinforced this conviction. Xi became determined to expand China’s global influence and adopt a much more assertive foreign policy (Cabestan, 2022).

In November 2014, Xi addressed the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, calling for a “*distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major country.*” He urged officials to learn from past experiences and to develop diplomacy with “*salient Chinese features and a Chinese vision*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2014).

Shortly after, in December 2014, at the Symposium on International Development and China’s Diplomacy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi elaborated on what he called “*major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.*” Using Wodak’s (2013) discourse strategy theory, we can interpret Xi’s rhetoric as applying a “*dismantling strategy*”—rejecting the identity of China as a developing nation while projecting the image of a strong and modern power. As Xi stated: “*Our responsibility is to unite and lead the entire Party and all ethnic groups... to realise the great revival of the Chinese nation*” (BBC, 2012).

In 2016, Xi outlined four pillars of China’s international policy:

1. *Building a new type of international relations based on win-win cooperation;*
2. *Establishing a global network of partnerships;*
3. *Promoting the “Asia-Pacific dream”*
4. *Advocating a new vision of Asian security.*

Wang Yi described the evolution of Chinese diplomacy as an “*unprecedented undertaking,*” echoing Xi’s call to maintain strong Chinese characteristics. These include support for the Chinese political system and development model, adherence to an independent foreign policy of peace, respect for the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and non-interference, and

prioritization of domestic development and reform. Together, these elements signal a regime determined to promote its own model of global governance (Poh & Li, 2017).

Xi's foreign policy now explicitly aims to make China the dominant power in Asia, surpass U.S. global influence, reshape international norms and institutions, protect China's core interests, and achieve reunification with Taiwan—by force if necessary (Cabestan, 2022). The goal is no longer cooperation with the United States but overt competition. Nevertheless, China's diplomatic rhetoric still features familiar terms like “*harmony*” and “*win-win solutions*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2016).

At the UN General Assembly in 2021, Xi proposed the *Global Development Initiative*, emphasizing commitments to: prioritizing development, a people-centered approach, shared benefits, innovation, harmony with nature, and results-oriented actions. Despite its assertiveness, China still seeks selective integration into global institutions and presents itself as a cooperative actor on issues like climate change. It maintains a reassuring image of a “*peaceful, friendly, and civilized lion*” while also expanding regional economic influence and preparing to “fight and win wars.” This posture reflects the idea of “*mutual respect*”—a core pillar of Xi's “*new type of great power relations*”—and signals China's growing demand for acceptance of one-party rule (Cohen, 2014).

After the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the concepts of building a “*community of shared future for mankind*” and implementing “*Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy*” became official priorities. These efforts aim to position China as a key factor in reshaping global governance. Yet, many contradictions remain within China's foreign policy discourse (Cabestan, 2022).

2.1. Relationship with the United States

2.1.1. Under the Obama Administration

This shift has coincided with a growing perception within China that U.S. policies are intended to contain its rise. The U.S. “*Pivot to Asia*” under the Obama administration, initially framed as a strategic rebalancing, was interpreted in Beijing as a clear attempt to limit China's influence. As Chinese national power grew, so too did domestic nationalist sentiment, which framed U.S. actions as hostile and obstructive (He & Tang, 2024). While the Obama administration initially sought cooperation with China on global issues such as climate change and nuclear proliferation, its efforts were met with limited reciprocity. Chinese leadership, wary of global responsibilities that could slow down its development, prioritized regional and domestic interests instead (Sutter, 2017). As China grew more confident in its capabilities, it began to confront U.S. influence directly, especially in Asia. By 2014, U.S. officials were issuing public and strident criticisms of China's assertiveness, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, Chinese official media glorified Xi's leadership, portraying him as confidently steering China toward global prominence in pursuit of the “*China Dream*.”

As we can observe at the joint Press conference with President Obama in November 2014, Xi's vision for China reflects a rejection of the U.S.-led global order, which is increasingly seen by Chinese scholars and policymakers as inequitable and outdated. Even if they emphasize the fact to put into practice the six principles “*No Conflict, No Confrontation, Mutual Respect, and Win-Win Cooperation*” (Xi Jinping, 2014). Xi Jinping mentioned these idea “*China and the US are countries of distinctive characteristics, enjoying broad common interests and yet having to properly handle some sensitive issues. ... The construction of the new model of major-country relationship between China and the US conforms to the fundamental interests of the two peoples, and is conducive to promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world at large*”. We can observe in this text that Xi Jinping emphasizes a need for a new model between the two majors profiles. He qualifies China on the same level as the US. As analyzed by He and Tang (2024), Chinese critiques have drawn on world-systems theory, such as that of Immanuel Wallerstein, to argue that the international system perpetuates inequalities, keeping countries like China in a subordinate position despite their growing power. From this perspective, the desire for national rejuvenation is not only strategic but also ideological and moral, positioning China as a challenger to global injustices.

In his speech in Seattle in 2015, Xi Jinping in front of Henry Kissinger is clear. In line with China's evolving foreign policy priorities, Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of establishing a new model of major-country relations with the United States—one grounded in non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation. He has argued that both sides should work to address their differences through dialogue and consultation, while respecting each other's core interests and major concerns. *Sensitive issues*, Xi (2015) suggests, *should be managed constructively to avoid misunderstandings, miscalculations, or conflict escalation, thereby preserving the broader framework of China–U.S. cooperation.* Xi Jinping want to prove that the Chinese will not let itself dominate by the US. According to Sutter (2017), Xi Jinping's government made it clear that positive relations with the U.S. would depend on American acceptance of China's priorities, which increasingly clashed with American interests.

In response, Washington's tone grew more confrontational. International criticisms were often dismissed, reinforcing a narrative of resistance against external pressures and reinforcing domestic support for Xi's assertive foreign policy. Xi's China no longer seeks integration on American terms, but recognition on its own terms-as a great power reshaping the global order (Sutter, 2017).

Another central source of friction—although not new—was economic competition. The United States continued to pressure China to embrace market reforms and assume greater responsibilities in global governance. Beijing, however, perceived such demands as efforts to slow its rise and maintain U.S. dominance. As Angela Poh and Mingjiang Li (2017) highlight, Chinese officials were particularly frustrated by the U.S. Congress's failure to pass reforms enhancing emerging economies' voting power within institutions like the IMF—a move described in *Daily China* (Weihua, 2014) as “*a slap in the face to the world.*” Alongside this, China's growing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific raised further alarms in Washington. Beijing's large-scale land reclamation and militarization in the South China Sea, coupled with its rejection of American freedom-of-navigation operations, reinforced perceptions of a more aggressive Chinese posture (Wuthnow, 2017).

Perhaps most significantly, China began articulating an ambition to reshape the regional security order. Xi Jinping's 2014 assertion that “*the people of Asia should run the affairs of Asia*” was widely interpreted as a direct challenge to the U.S.-led alliance system. Arms sales to Taiwan, long a point of contention, were once again described as a major “*irritant*” in

bilateral relations (Weihua, 2014). The Chinese government consistently framed such moves as violations of the One-China principle and called on the U.S. to uphold the commitments outlined in the three China-U.S. joint communiqués (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). While China continued to invoke the language of peaceful development, its official discourse made clear that reducing American influence in the region was a strategic objective. This included rejecting Cold War-era military alliances and promoting instead a regional security architecture led by Asian nations. At the 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Xi stated that “strengthening military alliances with a third party does not benefit the maintenance of regional security” and reiterated that “*Asia’s security ultimately must be protected by Asians*” (BBC, 2014).

These narratives point to a more assertive Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping, positioning China as a regional and global power in its own right—no longer a passive participant in a U.S.-dominated order. The consistent arms sales to Taiwan and the continued American military presence in the Indo-Pacific were perceived by Beijing as direct threats to its sovereignty and core interests. Although Chinese officials later clarified that external actors were not to be excluded entirely, the broader vision remained clear: China aimed to construct a regional order centered on itself. As Fairclough (2015) notes, China’s evolving rhetoric draws on binary oppositions of “*us*” versus “*them*,” reinforcing a discourse of leadership and national rejuvenation. Against this backdrop, what began as economic disagreement and maritime disputes evolved into a more systemic rivalry—one marked by competition over legitimacy, influence, and the right to shape the future of the international order.

2.2.2. Under Trump’s Administration

During the Trump administration, Chinese official rhetoric underwent a notable transformation, shaped by Washington’s confrontational posture and disengagement from multilateral frameworks. In this context, Xi Jinping’s “*China Dream*” narrative was maintained as a core vision of national rejuvenation, while Trump’s “*America First*” policies were reinterpreted in Chinese discourse as a strategic opportunity to expand influence and assume leadership in regional and global institutions (He & Tang, 2024). promoted different interpretations of the US interests, and particularly those who did not consider the maintenance of the current international order as highly beneficial for the United States (Baldaro & Dian, 2018). Chinese rhetoric emphasized contrast: where the U.S. was depicted as unreliable and

self-serving, China presented itself as a responsible and stable power, offering a model of governance grounded in economic cooperation and respect for sovereignty.

According to He & Tang (2024), China interpreted the Trump administration's retreat from global governance-evident in its withdrawal from multilateral agreements-as a vacuum to be filled. Chinese rhetoric promoted the Belt and Road Initiative not only as an infrastructure project but as a vision for inclusive global development and alternative governance. *"The Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries."* (CGTN, 2017). This discursive positioning allowed Beijing to reframe itself as a legitimate global leader, especially in institutions where U.S. presence was diminishing.

Regionally, China advanced its claim to leadership through the promotion of the *"New Asian security concept,"* a rhetorical tool used to delegitimize U.S. alliances as outdated Cold War mechanisms and to assert a vision of security based on Asian values and cooperation (Arase, 2019). Chinese discourse increasingly criticized American-led regional orders as hegemonic, while presenting Chinese leadership as peaceful and inclusive. Trump's regional disengagement was framed in official statements as evidence that China must assume responsibility for regional stability.

Taiwan emerged as one of the most rhetorically sensitive issues. Trump's policy shift-including direct engagement with Taiwanese leadership and increased arms sales-was perceived in Beijing as a severe violation of China's sovereignty. Medeiros (2019) notes that such actions prompted a rhetorical escalation from China, marked by strong condemnations, warnings of *"necessary countermeasures,"* and reaffirmations of the *"One China"* principle. Official rhetoric portrayed U.S. moves not only as threats to sovereignty but as attempts to undermine Chinese national unity, which demanded firm and even militarized responses in turn.

In the security domain, Chinese messaging sharpened in reaction to U.S. military presence in the South China Sea and closer ties with regional actors. Sutter (2017) highlights that while Chinese rhetoric continued to call for *"win-win cooperation"* and peaceful development, it also became increasingly nationalistic and defensive. Official statements framed American actions as provocations and emphasized China's resolve to defend its *"core interests."*

On the economic front, the Trump administration's imposition of tariffs and the broader trade war were interpreted in Chinese rhetoric as a strategy of economic containment. Lu & Zhou (2024) point out that China responded not only through countermeasures but also by strengthening diplomatic messaging that stressed China's commitment to globalization and market openness. This contrastive rhetoric depicted the U.S. as acting irrationally and unilaterally, while China positioned itself as a constructive actor defending the global economic order.

Throughout this period, Chinese diplomatic communication became more assertive and nationally focused. He & Tang (2024) observe that Chinese rhetoric turned increasingly inward-facing and identity-driven, portraying China as a civilizational state with a unique path and moral legitimacy. Simultaneously, international messaging presented China as a responsible power counterbalancing U.S. unpredictability. The Trump administration's policies enabled Beijing to reinforce its narratives of national sovereignty, global leadership, and regional legitimacy across all major domains of U.S.-China interaction.

2.2.3. Under Biden's Administration

After Trump's presidency, relations between China and the United States have particularly deteriorated. With the global shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S.-China relations did not significantly improve with the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House in January 2021. Although Biden brought a more traditional diplomatic style, strategic competition with China remained a top priority.

From the beginning of his term, President Biden made it clear that the United States saw China as its main competitor. He stated, "*We have ten years to prevent China from becoming the number one technology of the future,*" and members of his team emphasized the need to preserve America's competitive edge. His administration focused on strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, especially with countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, to contain China's growing influence (Le Corre, 2024; Frachon, 2023).

Taiwan remained a central point of tension. One major event was the visit of Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House, to Taiwan in August 2022, which triggered a strong response from Beijing. Even though the U.S. officially maintains the "*One China*" policy, this kind of political gesture was seen by China as a message of support to pro-independence movements in Taiwan.

Despite these tensions, the two governments continued to communicate. During a call in 2022, President Xi told President Biden that the U.S. and China should respect one another, avoid confrontation, and work to improve communication. Biden reassured him that the U.S. does not seek a new Cold War, does not aim to change China's political system, and does not support Taiwan's independence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). However, President Xi also warned that the U.S. had sent confusing signals on the Taiwan issue, which he considered dangerous. According to him, mishandling this question could seriously damage the already fragile relationship between the two powers.

2.2. Relationship with Taiwan

2.2.1. Official Discourse on Cross-Strait Relations

At the beginning of Xi Jinping's leadership, overlapping with the final years of President Ma Ying-jeou's second term in Taiwan, China's Taiwan policy reflected a blend of continuity with past strategies and a subtle shift toward more assertive political messaging. In 2015, the two leaders meet at Singapore, "*In a mutually respectful and constructive manner, the two sides candidly exchanged views on cross-Strait relations, focusing on peaceful development and national rejuvenation*", After the face-to-face meeting, Xi and Ma had a dinner in a "cordial and easy" atmosphere, according to the statement (Xinhua, 2015). The approach prioritized peaceful development, economic integration, and the gradual building of political trust. However, it also emphasized long-term reunification as an essential part of the broader Chinese national project, even as Beijing faced growing resistance from Taiwan's society and shifting domestic political currents.

Xi Jinping inherited a cross-Strait environment largely shaped by Hu Jintao's framework of "*peaceful development*," and initially appeared to maintain this general approach. As Huang (2017) notes, both sides continued diplomatic engagement without major breakthroughs or escalations in the early years of Xi's tenure. However, Xi soon began to reinterpret the framework by embedding it with stronger political and ideological undertones. In meetings with Vincent Siew in 2013 and 2014, Xi repeatedly emphasized the need to "*build mutual political trust*" and promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations based on a shared political foundation—namely, adherence to the "1992 Consensus" and opposition to "Taiwan independence" (Huang, 2017).

Xi further framed the relationship through a discourse of shared national identity. He asserted that “*people on both sides of the Strait belong to one family,*” appealing to a common cultural and historical heritage as the basis for future reunification. He described both sides as part of the same Chinese nation—one of the world’s greatest civilizations with over 5,000 years of history, whose ancestors had long settled in Taiwan. Xi stressed that this shared bloodline, culture, and history entails not only a mutual responsibility for the nation’s future, but also a collective aspiration toward its long-term development. As he stated, the cross-Strait situation should be understood in light of “*the overall interests and long-term development of the Chinese nation.*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The republic of China, 2015).

This rhetoric aligns with what De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) describe as discursive strategies of national identity construction, wherein language is used to mentally unify the nation. As Scobell (2014) points out, Taiwan continued to occupy a central role in Beijing’s national agenda—not only for its geopolitical significance, but also as a symbol of historical destiny and the embodiment of Chinese national identity.

In his meeting with Wu Po-hsiung in June 2013, Xi further elaborated on his position by introducing a “*four-point opinion*” to guide cross-Strait relations: (1) *firm adherence to the ‘1992 Consensus’ and opposition to ‘Taiwan independence’*; (2) *consolidation of political mutual trust*; (3) *expansion of cross-Strait exchanges and cooperation*; and (4) *reinforcement of a common sense of destiny* (Huang, 2017, p. 69). These statements revealed Xi’s intention to gradually institutionalize the one-China framework and deepen cross-Strait ties not only economically but ideologically.

Economic integration remained a cornerstone of Beijing’s approach during this period. Xi Jinping and CCP officials saw deepening Taiwan’s economic dependence on the mainland as a pragmatic way to make political progress (Huang, 2017). However, as Huang (2020) and Scobell (2014) note, public backlash in Taiwan — particularly the Sunflower Movement in 2014 — revealed a growing societal resistance to Beijing’s influence, especially among younger generations wary of political encroachment disguised as economic cooperation. Despite these challenges, Xi’s public messaging remained consistent and forward-looking. He framed cross-Strait relations as integral to the “*great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*” and tied reunification with Taiwan to the realization of the “Chinese Dream.” He is clear as that China and Taiwan need to come together again. His statements, such as “*we cannot hand those*

problems down from generation to generation,” reflected a longer-term vision that sought to address the Taiwan issue definitively under his leadership (Huang, 2017, p. 68).

In October 2013, Xi told a senior Taiwanese envoy that a political solution to cross-Strait relations *“could not be postponed forever,”* revealing his impatience with the status quo. Yet, as Jing Huang (2017) highlights, Beijing maintained a relatively accommodating tone throughout Ma’s presidency, signaling continued hope for engagement under a KMT-led government. The PRC’s disappointment with Taiwanese public opinion did not immediately translate into coercive measures; instead, it underscored a strategic calculation that the Kuomintang still offered the best path forward for peaceful unification. This Strategic choice changed sharply in 2016, when Tsai Ing-wen and the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won a landslide victory, marking a rupture in cross-Strait dialogue and triggering a more assertive posture from Beijing.

The evolution of Chinese rhetoric and strategy toward Taiwan under the administration of Tsai Ing-wen has been marked by a declaration Beijing which said that Tsai Ing-wen, who took office on Friday as Taiwan's new leader, of taking an ambiguous stand on the *“one-China principle”* in a speech after she was sworn in, thereby bringing uncertainty to cross-Straits relations (Yining, 2016). The period following Tsai’s election witnessed an increasingly aggressive stance from Beijing, underscoring the urgency of Taiwan’s reunification with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the deployment of coercive tactics, including diplomatic isolation, military intimidation, and subtle threats of force.

Tsai Ing-wen, did not explicitly acknowledge the 1992 Consensus—the understanding that both sides of the Strait belong to *“one China.”* In response, the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council issued a statement criticizing her stance. Chinese officials and scholars voiced concerns about the implications for cross-Strait relations. Ni pointed out that Taiwan’s economy had grown by less than 1 percent the previous year, while Zhang Guanhua, deputy director of the Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, warned that relations might enter a *“cold”* phase, marked by the suspension of cooperation and dialogue. According to Zhang Guanhua, deputy director of the Institute of Taiwan Studies of the Chinese Academy, *“Refusing to endorse the 1992 Consensus not only sabotages the political foundation and trust between the two sides, but also destroys prospects for economic exchange and cooperation. As a result, the interests of people from both sides will be hurt”* (Yining, 2016).

Following Tsai's refusal to accept the "*One China*" policy and the 1992 Consensus, Beijing responded by severing official communication channels and intensifying its efforts to isolate Taiwan on the international stage. This included pressuring other countries and international organizations to limit or terminate diplomatic ties with Taiwan, significantly reducing the island's global presence (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021). In 2018, Xi Jinping declared that Taiwan "must and will be" reunified with the mainland, reiterating support for peaceful unification under the "one country, two systems" model. This position, however, appeared contradictory to the increasingly coercive measures taken by Beijing, including diplomatic isolation and military pressure.

Xi has not hesitated to issue stern warnings to Taiwan. He has repeatedly emphasized that Beijing views the island as a breakaway province and warned that "*independence will only bring hardship.*" He further asserted that unification is "an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Xi has also framed the Taiwan issue as a purely internal matter, declaring that "*foreign interference is intolerable*" (Central Tibetan Administration, 2019).

2.2.1. Policy-making

In his analysis, Wuthnow (2017) highlights that China's growing military capabilities, particularly in the form of advanced missile systems and naval power, are part of a broader strategy to assert its control over Taiwan. The use of military force, while not explicitly preferred, has become an integral part of Beijing's coercive strategy, especially in the context of its deterrence approach. The introduction of military exercises and live-fire demonstrations, as well as the deployment of anti-ship and ballistic missiles, exemplify China's growing readiness to employ force should Taiwan move toward independence. A critical aspect of China's strategy under Xi Jinping has been the use of military pressure to deter Taiwan from pursuing independence. The frequent military encroachments in the Taiwan Strait, such as the 2020 breach of the median line, have become more explicit over time. As Tai-Ting Liu (2024) points out, Xi's rise marked a dramatic shift in the tone of cross-Strait relations, emphasizing military and political confrontation over the peaceful approaches seen in previous years. The annual military drills in the Taiwan Strait, including live-fire exercises and mock amphibious landings, aim not only to demonstrate China's military capability but also to convey a clear message to the Taiwanese population and leadership: any move toward formal independence would invite severe consequences.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the urgency of reunification has been a recurring theme in Chinese rhetoric, as we can see in the White Paper in 2022 named *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era*. The Xi Jinping government is clear *Taiwan Is Part of China - This Is an Indisputable Fact and China's Complete Reunification Is a Process That Cannot Be Halted*.

The rhetoric surrounding these military actions is equally important. As noted by Wuthnow (2017), Chinese military officials often frame these operations as necessary for regional stability, positioning them as defensive measures to counter the perceived threat posed by Taiwan's pro-independence stance. The aggressive rhetoric is amplified by state-controlled media, which frequently employs harsh language to condemn Taiwan's leadership, labeling Tsai's government as a destabilizing force in the region. Alongside military pressure, Beijing has leveraged diplomatic isolation as a key tool to undermine Taiwan's international standing. Blackwill and Zelikow (2021) emphasize that Beijing's efforts to push Taiwan out of international organizations and reduce its diplomatic allies are a critical part of its "soft" strategy. Through coercive diplomacy, China has pressured countries and businesses worldwide to refer to Taiwan as part of China, significantly limiting its international space. In his 2019 speech, Xi Jinping reaffirmed the "One Country, Two Systems" model, offering Taiwan autonomy in internal affairs while asserting PRC control over foreign policy and defense. This rhetoric has been a central element in China's efforts to push Taiwan into reunification, despite its rejection by the Taiwanese public. As Tsai Ing-wen (2020) has repeatedly stated, Taiwan will not accept the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, reinforcing her government's commitment to maintaining Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic system.

In the early stages, the relationship between China and Taiwan was always considered highly sensitive, particularly with regard to security issues (Courmont, 2014). Indeed, with the absence of mutual recognition, the risks of conflict remain very high, pushing China to adopt coercive behaviors. In 2014, there were nearly 1,400 ballistic missiles deployed in the Fujian province, pointed at Taiwan (Courmont, 2014). Since Tsai Ing-wen took power in 2016, Beijing has intensified its military intimidation, even launching missiles to disrupt Taiwan's direct presidential elections. China regularly conducts military exercises, especially in Taiwan's airspace, seeking to encircle the island and apply psychological pressure (Larter, 2022). In the same vein, China increased the number of fighter jets deployed around the South China Sea islands, particularly in Taiwan's airspace toward the end of 2021 (Larter, 2022) and in 2022,

following the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, which sparked Beijing's anger (Le Monde, 2022).

In times of rising tensions, these maneuvers aim to demonstrate China's determination to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Reports on China's military power have identified various scenarios for the use of force against Taiwan. As previously explained, China regularly demonstrates its capabilities, reinforcing the opinion among experts that the balance of forces in the Taiwan Strait has clearly tilted in China's favor (Miller, 2022). External coercion is thus manifested by the deteriorating situation for Taiwan and the restriction of its international space (Shattuck, 2020). For example, China imposed economic sanctions on Lithuania after the latter opened a diplomatic mission with Taipei (Colby, 2011). This strategy constitutes a coercive logic, powered by economic leverage. Meanwhile, Beijing has restricted Taiwan's participation in international organizations with a combination of military pressure, diplomatic isolation, and strategic encirclement, Beijing has sought to deter Taiwanese independence and ensure that Taiwan remains firmly within China's sphere of influence. The rhetoric surrounding this strategy has evolved from a call for peaceful reunification to more explicit threats of force, as China becomes increasingly frustrated by Taiwan's rejection of its terms for reunification. As scholars such as Wuthnow (2017), Blackwill and Zelikow (2021), and Tai-Ting Liu (2024) have pointed out, the growing military and diplomatic pressure from Beijing, coupled with the continued rejection of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, ensures that the Taiwan issue remains a central point of tension in international relations.

Xi Jinping's leadership marks a decisive turning point in the evolution of Chinese political discourse and foreign policy. His era is characterized by a move toward a more centralized, emotionally charged, and assertive narrative, underpinned by the powerful vision of the "*China Dream*" and the national "*great rejuvenation*." These concepts fuse historical memory with ideological ambition, mobilizing national pride and collective identity to reinforce the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy at home and signal China's rise abroad.

Unlike his predecessor Hu Jintao, who adopted a more technocratic and inclusive approach emphasizing peaceful development, particularly in the Taiwan context, Xi has consolidated power around a unified narrative of strength, struggle, and historical destiny. His leadership places the Party at the heart of China's future and portrays national unity—including the recovery of Taiwan—as a sacred and emotionally resonant goal. The foreign policy that accompanies this domestic vision is more competitive, confident, and at times confrontational,

seeking not only to secure China's national interests but also to shape global governance structures in line with Beijing's strategic priorities.

Though Chinese diplomacy continues to employ cooperative rhetoric when advantageous, it is increasingly clear that Beijing aims to project its model as a viable alternative to liberal democratic norms. The Taiwan issue, in particular, has become deeply intertwined with the Party's identity and legitimacy. The narrative of reunification is no longer framed merely in terms of shared cultural ties, as under Hu Jintao, but as an imperative of national revival and sovereignty defense under Xi.

Despite these pressures, the resilience of Taiwan's democratic system and the increasing international support for its sovereignty suggest that the path to reunification remains fraught with significant challenges for Beijing. In this new era, the emotional power of historical narratives and the strategic ambitions of an ascendant China are driving forces that will continue to shape cross-Strait dynamics and the broader international order in the years to come.

Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, we propose to examine, through the lens of constructivism and a methodology grounded in discourse analysis, how Chinese national identity has shaped its policies and actions toward Taiwan during the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras. This theoretical framework has proven particularly useful in shedding light on the dynamics of the cross-Strait relationship from the Chinese perspective. By considering China's historical background, its geographical context, and internal political situation, we can better understand how it has constructed a national narrative that informs and legitimizes its stance on Taiwan. This analysis ultimately offers deeper insight into the rationale behind China's contemporary approach to the Taiwan issue.

Our analysis helps us understand that there is a strong and consistent will to unify the Chinese nation through the narrative. When we examine the speeches of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, we can see how both reflect the influence of China's historical past. Both leaders emphasize the idea of one single, united Chinese nation, which has been a key part of the national narrative since the time of Mao Zedong, who aimed to bring people together under a shared identity—especially through his support of the peasantry. This same logic appears in modern discourse through repeated expressions such as “*common destiny*,” showing a desire for national unity and revival.

Both administrations promote a vision of renewal and strength, presenting China as a “*new force*.” Development plays a central role in this vision, both in terms of political priorities and national identity. We also notice the ongoing influence of Confucian thought in the language of both leaders, through frequent use of terms like “*prosperity*,” “*harmony*,” and “*common home*.” These references to traditional values show how the past continues to shape the present, even more strongly under Xi Jinping.

Compared to Hu, Xi's discourse shows a stronger and more assertive tone, especially through references to national “*humiliation*” and the goal of “*great rejuvenation*.” The idea of a Confucian world and the memory of the “*Middle Kingdom*,” when China was the center of East Asia and other countries depended on it, are still very present. Through this discourse, China expresses a desire to return to that central position in the region, with a united people and a strong sense of national purpose. This vision is reflected in the concept of a new “*era of development with Chinese characteristics*.”

When it comes to Taiwan, how can we understand the increasing assertiveness of China? Our analysis shows that China's development has not followed an easy path, particularly due to its complicated and often tense relationship with the United States. From the beginning, the U.S. has viewed China with suspicion, largely because of its foundation as a communist state. Initially, the United States recognized Taiwan as the legitimate representative of China, only later shifting its position in the hope that the People's Republic of China would adapt to Western norms and systems.

It is important to note that China does not necessarily seek global domination but rather aims to reestablish its influence within its own region. It no longer wishes to be seen as a developing country or to conform to Western political systems. This explains its emphasis on "*development with Chinese characteristics*," which reflects a desire to set its own standards, pursue its national interests, achieve the "*great rejuvenation*," and eventually reunify with what it considers its lost territories—Taiwan being central among them.

At first, China was not seen as a major threat, especially during the early years of the Obama administration. However, as China shifted from a "*low profile*" foreign policy to a more assertive development strategy—often called "*development with Chinese characteristics*"—U.S. perceptions began to change. Concerned about their strategic position in the Asia-Pacific region, American policymakers increasingly labeled China as a "*rogue state*" and a threat. This view of China as a threat and even an enemy became more prominent during the Trump administration but has continued, to some extent, under President Biden.

While the Kuomintang (KMT) historically emphasized a hierarchical vision of national unity, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has relied on a discourse of fraternity, often invoking the idea that people on both sides of the Strait are "*of the same blood*." The well-known slogan "*one nation, two systems*" reflects this approach. For the CCP, national security in the region, development, and rejuvenation are deeply linked to reunification. As Taiwan increasingly asserts its own identity and receives support from the United States, China perceives this as a growing threat to its national pride, regional leadership, and identity construction. This sense of urgency which is taking more and more importance is especially visible in the 2022 white papers after the visit of Nancy Pelosi.

Constructivism has thus helped us better address our research questions. Today, China seeks for Taiwan to follow the same path as the mainland, particularly for reasons related to national identity, historical continuity, and internal legitimacy. From the Chinese perspective, reunification is not only a geopolitical objective but also a symbolic and ideological one. It reflects the desire to restore a sense of historical unity and to affirm the success of the Chinese model as an alternative to Western liberal democracies.

By framing Taiwan as an inseparable part of its national identity, the Chinese government reinforces its narrative of rejuvenation and regional centrality. Any deviation from this vision, especially Taiwan's growing identification as a separate political and cultural entity, is perceived as a threat to China's internal cohesion and long-term ambitions. Therefore, the cross-Strait issue is not only about territory, but also about the defense of a national story that has been constructed over decades, where unity, harmony, and shared destiny are core principles.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that analyzing the China–Taiwan relationship solely through a constructivist lens has its limitations. While constructivism offers valuable insight into identity formation and the role of discourse, incorporating other major theoretical frameworks in international relations—namely liberalism and realism—could provide a more comprehensive understanding. A liberal perspective would help highlight the dynamics of economic interdependence and the role of international institutions and liberal norms in shaping Taiwan's identity and global engagement. Meanwhile, a realist approach would offer crucial insights into military strategies, material power, and regional security concerns. Examining the situation through the prism of power—particularly through the concepts of soft power, hard power, and sharp power—would enrich our understanding of China's tools of influence and its broader strategic ambitions. It would also be relevant to look at the situation in the China Sea, which would give us a better understanding of China's geopolitical stakes and the importance of Taiwan. Altogether, this multidimensional approach would allow us to better explain the dynamics of the relationship and gain a deeper understanding of China's ambitions regarding reunification.

In the end, the China–Taiwan relationship cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the deep historical, ideological, and identity-based dimensions that shape it. China's pursuit of reunification goes beyond mere territorial claims—it reflects a broader struggle for recognition,

legitimacy, and the restoration of a national narrative deeply rooted in its past and the construction of the environment.

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