

AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY, CHINA, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, POLITICS, WORLD

Behind the 'Red Curtain': Decoding China's institutional logics

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security concerns to reject Chinese investments and limit Chinese involvement in security projects. On the other hand, Australia has vocally decried what it sees as economic coercion from China, positioning itself as a victim in these dynamics.

Historically, China's foreign policy was predominantly driven by the Party's authority; however, this began to shift when China joined the WTO, initiating broader interactions with foreign entities. For decades, its foreign policy strategy was characterised by a low profile and a conciliatory stance, aimed at allaying global concerns about its rising influence. Notably, diplomats began seeing themselves not just as Party functionaries, but as seasoned professionals with independent roles.

As I wrote in an article for *The Conversation* in November 2022, a pronounced shift emerged in 2017 with China's assertive 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, coinciding with President Xi Jinping's second term. Graham Allison has noted that this tenure is marked by ambitions to elevate China as a global powerhouse. Prior to this shift, the West had predominantly perceived China's rise through a lens of optimism, expecting greater political openness, adherence to the rule of law, and a pro-market economic orientation.

China's enactment of the 'Foreign Relations Law' on July 1 has legitimated this strategic shift, signalling the country's official embrace of an assertive stance of "struggle" against perceived threats to its interests. For Chinese diplomats, this shift places a spotlight on Party loyalty, overshadowing traditional diplomatic roles characterised by accommodation.

From a bureaucratic viewpoint, this legislation underscores China's transition from "national" organisations or government entities to "central" structures interwoven within its governance. In the Chinese political lexicon, the term "central" typically connotes a Party structure. This development raises pertinent questions: What will be the impact of this change on China's global engagement, and how should the West strategically respond?

China's foreign policy mirrors the way it deals with domestic matters. China presently confronts unprecedented domestic challenges that have led to a notable shift towards heightened central control and centralised policymaking. Since the post-Mao era, the CCP's legitimacy has hinged on sustained economic growth. When this foundation wavers, apart from embracing greater domestic control, adopting a more assertive stance towards foreign 'challengers' serves as another tool to preserve the Party's legitimacy. Ultimately, few strategies rival the effectiveness of an external threat in maintaining internal unity in China.

Amid escalating China-US tensions, especially in technological domains such as clean energy transition, so-called "third power" nations such as Germany, South Korea, and Australia are recognising the impracticality of a complete decoupling from China. Facing such geopolitical complexity, these nations need to carefully consider their options when making strategic moves in their engagement with China.



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