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# ПОЛІТИЧНИЙ ТА СОЦІАЛЬНО-ЕКОНОМІЧНИЙ РОЗВИТОК КИТАЮ

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## CHINA'S STRATEGIC THINKING FEATURES AND ITS GRAND STRATEGY CLARIFICATION

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This paper is the first part on the vast issue of China's Grand Strategy. It elaborates on Chinese strategic thinking distinctive features, seeking to clarify the country's Grand Strategy type. Whereas China has been constantly growing for last decades and is supposed to pop up as the first world economy soon, it is of high importance for Ukraine and its decision-makers to know the essence of Chinese Grand Strategy and the challenges of understanding China's strategic thought. The article discloses the general theoretical concept of Grand Strategy as well.

Such knowledge will be useful for Kyiv and required in terms of trade cooperation with Beijing necessity as well as postwar global order reformatting, where China is going to abandon the usual role of liberal world order "assembly plant", and become an important actor across geopolitical and geoeconomic domains in new arising multipolar global architecture. Chinese Grand Strategy is being altered right now, entering its new stage and changing its tools. Beijing has been preparing for this during decades after the Global Financial Crisis, Brexit, Crimea annexation, COVID-19 pandemic and Russian invasion to Ukraine: in 2023 China has already become a Mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia, thus effectively increased its international influence in the Middle East.

The actuality of this topic is emphasized by given unpleasantness for Kyiv due to China's neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. Therefore, the author elucidates why Beijing did not support Kyiv amid Moscow's invasion. Nowadays Beijing's consideration comes through the lens of Chinese own geostrategic clash with the USA over regional and global leadership. Now Beijing, a truly hardheaded realist strategic thinking actor, views Ukraine as the subject of ruthless great-power confrontation and unfortunately doesn't condemn Russia for military aggression.

**Keywords:** China, Chinese grand strategy, Chinese strategic thinking, grand strategy clarification.

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## ОСОБЛИВОСТІ СТРАТЕГІЧНОГО МИСЛЕННЯ КИТАЮ ТА КЛАРИФІКАЦІЯ ЙОГО ГЕНЕРАЛЬНОЇ СТРАТЕГІЇ

*П. В. Шевченко*

Ця стаття є першою частиною дослідження Генеральної стратегії Китаю. Вона розглядає китайські особливості стратегічного мислення, а також висвітлює тип Генеральної стратегії цієї країни. Тоді як Китай постійно ріс останніми десятиріччями, та до 2030 року стане першою економікою у світі, для України та її лідерів необхідно знати суть китайської Генеральної стратегії та розуміти їхню стратегічну думку. Стаття також розглядає теоретичний концепт Генеральної стратегії.

Таке знання буде корисним Києву через необхідність торговельної співпраці з Пекіном, а також за умов зміни повоєнного глобального порядку, де Китай залишить роль «світової фабрики» ліберального світового порядку, воліючи стати важливим геополітичним і гео економічним гравцем у новій мультиполярній архітектурі. Китайська Генеральна стратегія змінюється прямо зараз, входячи в нову фазу, як і її інструментарій. Пекін готувався до цього довго, після глобальної фінансової кризи, Брексіту, анексії Криму, пандемії COVID-19 та російського вторгнення до України: в 2023 році Китай уже став медіатором між Іраном і Саудівською Аравією, таким чином значно підвищивши свій міжнародний вплив на Близькому Сході.

Актуальність цього топіку підкреслена неприємною для Києва нейтральною позицією Китаю щодо російсько-української війни, тоді як Президент В. Зеленський намагається гуртувати всі країни навколо підтримки України. Автор також пояснює, чому Пекін не підтримує Київ на тлі російського вторгнення. Китай бачить війну кризь призму геостратегічного протистояння зі США на регіональному та глобальному рівнях. Тому Китай, жорсткий апологет реалізму, вбачає Україну суб'єктом безжальної конфронтації великих держав і, на жаль, не засуджує Росію за військове вторгнення.

**Ключові слова:** Китай, китайська Генеральна Стратегія, китайське стратегічне мислення, кларифікація Генеральної Стратегії.

### **Introduction**

Chinese stance towards the ongoing since 2014 Russo-Ukrainian confrontation has always been vague. This was caused by, firstly, on the one hand, acceptable for Ukraine and international community neutral conciliatory public statements from Beijing about Russia-inspired hybrid warfare in Eastern Ukraine, and, on the other, Chinese unwillingness to approve annexation of Crimea; secondly, by conventional wisdom underestimating of opaque Russia-China partnership importance for China; thirdly, Kyiv's confidence in close economic cooperation with Beijing, as an effective means to construct bilateral relationship, putting the political interaction on hold, namely having "hot economic and cold political" relations with China.

Thus, Beijing's attitude to the possible future full-scale war and choosing sides was an enigma. This suited China, which foreign policy adhered to its axiom "five principles of peaceful coexistence" (和平共处五项原则), and China maintained economic connections with both, being the biggest trading partner for Russia as well as Ukraine.

However, it became clear in 2022 after the Russian military invasion, that the die about Chinese position had already been cast. Publicly China's stance towards geopolitical "Ukrainian problem" was aligned with Russia's pre-war ultimatum by

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former minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi: "...now (sides) must ASAP come back to Minsk agreements"<sup>1</sup>.

Beijing's subduction towards what has been known as today's neutrality within the Moscow and Kyiv confrontation was gradual and not sudden at all, given the recent change of Chinese Grand Strategy.

Since Ukraine had become independent, China was eager to establish a profound relationship with Ukraine, realizing the great geopolitical and geoeconomic potential of the country, therefore Beijing's intentions crystalized in a bilateral strategic partnership, signed in 2011. But a few years later inclined to cooperation with China President Yanukovich and his government lost power after the Euromaidan protests, which were apprehended in China, openly by some leading scholars, as a "color revolution supported by the USA" [吴文成 2022] – something strongly opposed and unwanted by Beijing itself.

Since then, unpleasantly for Ukraine and with further degradation of political and diplomatic ties, China subjectively perceived Kyiv as a subject of American geopolitical influence, while simultaneously two other growing trends were progressing. First – developing fierce confrontation between Beijing and Washington; second – increasing China-Russia cooperation.

As of 2023, pragmatic Beijing continues to view Russo-Ukrainian war only through the realism prism of its geostrategic competition with the USA, where Beijing's opportunistic partnership with Moscow is an instrument against American global influence. So, China's stance towards Russo-Ukrainian war is not "pro-Russian" and posed against Kyiv, but rather "pro-Chinese", and its understating must start with the scrutiny of Beijing's Grand Strategy at political, economic, and military levels.

### **Literature review: theory and practice**

**How this paper is structured?** Much recent research about Chinese strategical calculations against the background of Russo-Ukrainian war reveals only narrow fragments of current Grand Chinese Strategy, whether they are changes in political relationship between Beijing and other states or economic gains and losses for China due to war. Just a few of them highlight the whole Chinese Grand Strategy and today's Beijing's stance as a consequence and an integrated part of a big complete pattern.

This article opposes the aforementioned approaches, thereby striving to create a comprehensive view of Chinese Grand Strategy. It begins with the theoretical part. The piece firstly argues that China has its unique strategic thought, often underestimated by foreigners (or *outsiders* 外人), distinctive features of which are disclosed by L. Pye, Fei Xiaotong, H. Kissinger, E. Luttwak and others.

Secondly, the article conceptualizes that China has a profound long-term grand strategy aimed at the global order reformatting. Its existence is proven by the practical introduction of Beijing's strategic moves logic and description of China's actions in political, military, and economic fields.

The biggest contribution to the second paper's section was made by works of R. Doshi, M. Pillsbury, E. Economy, and S. Norton. The character of the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> 外交部 (2022), 王毅: 各方需为和平而努力, 而不是一味制造恐慌, 渲染战争, available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202202/t20220219\\_10643695.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202202/t20220219_10643695.shtml).

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Grand Strategy can be identified as realistic. Practically the paper goes through studying of numerous Chinese leaders' speeches, government documents, and articles written both by politicians and scholars.

### Unique operative techniques

**Why Chinese strategic thought is important?** While talking about the differences in strategic thought between China and the Western states, the first thing to mention is Chinese different thinking modes produced by culture, language, and history impact [La Barre 1946].

In the 1940-s Americans launched Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures (RCC) – a project with the purpose to understand various Eurasian mindsets, where one of the major focuses was on Chinese [Metraux 1980]. The research was carried out by such prominent scholars: anthropologists R. Bunzel, R. Benedict, M. Mead, and sociologist N. Leites, who interviewed Chinese emigrants in New York and analyzed themes of popular Chinese novels.

Researchers came up with the next general conclusion: Chinese view strategy uniquely. It was found, firstly, that the Chinese prefer indirect actions to direct actions, ambiguity, and opaqueness to clarity and transparency. Secondly, Chinese literature and strategic thought highly praise smart cunning and unexpected misleading surprise moves, which induce opponents to act not according to their plans. Therefore, *vis-à-vis* is confused and loses the initial focus and strategic position – *shi* (勢) [Pillsbury 2016, 16–17]. The correct implementation of cunning should lead to creation of favorable external conditions for side employing them. Chinese leaders have always been using cunning. Strategic deception in interaction with the opponents was one of Mao Zedong's guiding principles [Ghandi 1965].

The cultural collective-individual differences and another social structure (Chinese society's "differential mode of association" (差序格局) versus Western "organizational mode of association" (团体格局)) also influence Chinese strategical thinking [费孝通 2018]. According to Fei Xiaotong's theory Chinese society is constructed from egocentric circles interconnected by kinship, geographical belonging and race affinity. Western society is made by organizational structures similar to each other because of transcendental values.

For starters, China, as L. Pye argues, "is a civilization pretending to be a nation-state", whilst Chinese are inclined to have a strong dividing sense of themselves and foreigners as "us" and more alienated "them" [Pye 1998]. This emphasizes the challenge of China's Strategy understanding due to great impact of rich Chinese culture on it and unknown for outsiders' cultural folk practices.

Chinese cultural view is more holistic compared to Western one. Such impact is shown, for example, in different legal processes understanding, where westerners are quite legalistic and have corresponding expectations towards partners, but Chinese broadly stress ethical and moral principles, collective responsibility, which may be beyond foreigners' grasp and lead to misinterpretations<sup>2</sup>.

But the abundant and thousand years China's history matters the most. It is the cradle of this civilization's strategic thought, providing Chinese correlative

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<sup>2</sup> Pye L. (1982), Chinese Commercial Negotiating Style, available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2837.html>.

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thinking with necessary analogs according to which the current situation can be compared and appropriate decisions are taken.

It should be noted: the strategic landscape is perceived by the Chinese as a single whole – good and evil, near and far, past and future – all are interrelated. Civilizational longevity taught Chinese that the most vital is not “good and evil”, but strategic survival by lucky accommodation to changing circumstances of external world, and further growth into harmony with it [Kissinger 2010].

This approach guides Chinese, who view history as a cyclical process of life and death, decay and reunification, rise and fall. As H. Kissinger notes, “China’s sense of time beats to a different rhythm of America’s; when an American is asked to date a historical event, he refers to a specific date on the calendar. When a Chinese describes an event, he places it within a dynasty”<sup>3</sup>. What was working then, still is actual today.

Thereby, it’s not a surprise that today’s China’s rulers, competing for global leadership, are inclined to implement ancient military stratagems in present Beijing’s grand strategy. For instance, Sun Zi’s Art of War stratagems or other cunningings from Seven Military Classics were widely used by various warlords during the Warring States period [Pillsbury 2016, 37–56].

Nowadays fast-changing global order with fierce great state competition amongst America, China, and other powerful countries dramatically resembles Warring States period’s savage Darwinian survival contest, named “combative coexistence”. At that time the biggest realms made coalitions to oust one another or bring down a hegemon with the only single purpose to establish hegemony by themselves. R. Kagan describes the new global environment as “overlapping spheres of interests and contested regions, which are the source of great-power conflicts”.

### **Grand Strategy clarification**

**What is Grand Strategy? Which type is Chinese Grand Strategy?** Johns Hopkins professor Hal Brands argues that grand strategy definition is “one of the most slippery and widely abused terms in the foreign policy lexicon” [Gavin 2015]. The term’s incomprehensibility is intensified by the fact countries do not disclose their grand strategy publicly, so that we can only design the state’s grand strategy by country’s strategic actions analysis as well as further synthesis of coordinated **military**, **economic**, and **political** government’s statecraft.

These particular areas are picked out because of their grand strategy integration. American scholar B. Posen says “grand strategy is a collection of military, economic, and political means and ends with which a state attempts to achieve security”<sup>4</sup>. In one word, grand strategy is a theory that determines where and how states ought to develop and what they want to achieve as their strategic objectives through the lens of a country’s security and growth.

According to British diplomat E. Crowe to pursue grand strategy goals states must possess such approaches:

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<sup>3</sup> Kissinger H. (2001), *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* New York : Simon & Schuster, 137.

<sup>4</sup> Kirss A. (2018), *Does Grand Strategy Matter?* *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (winter 2018), pp. 116–132

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1) grand strategic concepts – *ends, ways, and means* (conceptualized views, ideas, and concerns about security threats as well as development patterns on how to deal with them);

2) grand strategic capabilities – coordinated national institutions statecraft, answering not only questions “*what*” should be done, but also “*when*” and “*why*”;

3) grand strategic conduct – consistent with country’s strategic concepts policy across military, economic and political domains [Doshi 2022, 24–33].

In China’s case, the sources of grand strategy description are made by, firstly, leaders’ speeches and program plans, authoritative texts, and documents; secondly, government compendiums, e.g. “White books”, “Blue books” (白皮书, 蓝皮书) and other institutions’ reports; thirdly, observation of combined state’s activities at military, economic and political levels as well as identification of what synchronized policy shifts were taken across these domains by the official documents’ strategic guidelines.

Thus, even though grand strategies are not openly published or formally documented, they profoundly influence the statecraft, when leaders make crucial state decisions about: a) country’s development; b) opposing enemies; c) resource allocation [Norton 2015]. Each state has a grand strategy, as E. Luttwak argues, “all states have a grand strategy; they know it or not” [Luttwak 2011, 409–418]. The point is whether the state realizes its grand strategy, systematically implements it, and aligns its institution’s performance towards strategic goals achievement or not.

In China’s case, the state does: Beijing formulates its grand strategy goals and transforms them into concrete understandable for implementers’ guidelines.

Particular country’s grand strategy, as a theory defining ‘how, why, and when’ the state should achieve its strategic goals, can be also identified through the patterns of international relations theories.

Concerning China, the nature of its grand strategy combined with deep Chinese historic strategic thought, philosophy (e.g. legalist school (法家)), Confucianism, and CCP Leninist-Marxist character influence, is estimated as realistic, but with unique Chinese features [Brands 2020]. But even if the type of Chinese Grand Strategy is realistic, it has a high level of adaptivity, economic dynamism, cultural appeal, meaning Beijing made conclusions from the Soviet Union collapse.

China, as a mature civilization, has experienced fierce domestic competition and fought for survival and prosperity for centuries during long up-and-down history; this made it a true realism practitioner. Moreover, modern international relations theory may refer current Chinese Grand Strategy to offensive realism domain, where states are deeply concerned with security scarcity, balancing on a verge of war. But Beijing is carrying out its grand strategy in a unique way, different from the Western, trying to avoid direct armed confrontation.

China, while implementing its Grand Strategy, prefers subtlety, indirect actions, and patient accumulation of relative advantages [Kissinger 2010, 43–56]. However, it, firstly, respects and employs power politics, according to which countries look for power optimization and security maximization; secondly, views states as central actors in international system, where states egoistically act in their narrow self-interests; thirdly, perceives international political system as anarchic,

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where the current hierarchy (world order) is not fixed and can be reorganized<sup>5</sup>. For example, such China's approach is visible in international economy, which Beijing views as an arena for tough competition as well, where zero-sum logic prevails over positive-sum terms [Friedberg 2018].

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<sup>5</sup> Jyalita H. (2021), Defensive Realism's Perspective on Rising China's Behavior as A Status Quo State, Sentries, Vol. 2, No. 1, available at: <https://journal.unpar.ac.id/index.php/Sentries/issue/view/449>.

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