

Learning Empire. Autonomy, Dependence, and China's Emerging Imperial Practices

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Overview. Has the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerged as a novel empire? What are its key imperial practices, and how and why are they being deployed and adapted? This Research Unit (RU) is inspired by the observation that China's tradition of "keeping a low profile" internationally was abandoned in 2013 with the new leadership under Xi Jinping. Instead, political leaders and business elites moved beyond controlled integration into the established Western-led international order(s) and are now learning how to build Sinocentric hierarchies. This change is reflected in aggressive behavior toward Taiwan, asymmetrical bilateral "partnerships" with states and businesses especially in the so-called Global South, concepts such as the "community with a shared future for mankind" that aim to bind partners to the PRC ideationally, and a China-led system of high-tech industries, as well as in financial, digital, science, and outer space infrastructure. The party-state has pivoted from promoting China's compatibility with the world to making (parts of) the world compatible with China.

With this RU, we seek to better understand and explain this new dimension of China's global practices. Our aim is to conceptualize the PRC as a learning empire striving for greater **autonomy**, and facilitating, as well as benefiting from, the de facto **dependence** of foreign actors and institutions on its economy and/or political support. We hypothesize that while the PRC is not pursuing a "grand strategy" to achieve global supremacy and displace the "American" order (Doshi, 2021), many of its **emerging practices** have an **imperial** quality, i.e., they produce center-periphery relations that contribute to safeguarding the autonomy and security of the party-state. We depart from a broad definition of empire as the formal or informal control of peripheral polities by a dominant center (Doyle, 1986). This definition emphasizes asymmetrical relationships that extend across territorial boundaries and are sustained through political, economic, ideational, and coercive means (Osterhammel, 2006, 2022). In contrast to some historical empires, including aspects of China's past imperial dynasties, the novel Chinese empire is less about territorial conquest and more about informal influence in the domestic spheres of other states and over value chains and a range of infrastructures abroad. We will investigate empire within China's large and expanding network of peripheries created by means of a number of imperial practices. These differ from the practices attributed to US "hegemony" during and especially after the Cold War, where relations are seen as characterized by consensual leadership, shared norms, and multilateralism (e.g., Ikenberry, 2001).

Moreover, we expect this RU to make a valuable contribution to debates about the future of international order(s). We do not claim that China is unique in developing imperial qualities. In the current era, where no power or powers are able or willing to comprehensively manage or steer economic and political affairs on a global scale, the rise of empires, each with its own zones of influence, is quite conceivable. By focusing on China, we therefore aim to contribute to a better understanding of this emerging inter-imperial order and the changes in the behavior of major powers.

The RU is structured around three objectives. **First**, the RU will focus on **policy learning** by China. Learning is crucial to comprehend how Chinese decision-makers adapt and change course while operating within complex domestic and global environments. We propose that Chinese elites are in the midst of learning the governance techniques necessary for the country to emerge as an empire.

Second, we investigate five **imperial practices** to address the question of how Chinese policymakers and associated state-business and other networks are creating a novel empire:

- *Control over economic structures*, i.e., establishing control over, or centrality within, infrastructure and value chains largely outside Western economies;
- *Intermediary creation*, i.e., cultivating foreign partners who support the imperial center in exercising influence;
- *Divide and rule*, i.e., the segmentation of a variety of foreign elite actors through heterogeneous contracting;
- *Ideational binding*, i.e., propagating ideas and cultivating acceptance among others in the process of becoming a center of knowledge production;
- *Threats and use of force*, i.e., using threatening signals and various types of violence to secure the party-state.

We identified these imperial practices based on a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. We consider them particularly salient in the Chinese case and seek to investigate them systematically. It is our assumption that they have emerged in response to international opposition to China's growing global footprint and perceived influence, escalating US-China rivalry, the weakening of the US as an ordering power, and an economic and technological shift toward Asia. But domestic politico-economic changes, state capabilities, and ideational sources for empire building under the Xi administration also play a crucial role.

Third, we aim to analyze the **outcomes** of Chinese practices. On the one hand, this is related to the party-state's goal of building more economic, political, technological, institutional, and intellectual **autonomy** in the interest of self-determined economic modernization and regime stability. Building autonomy is defined as improving the ability to make decisions without being dependent on external forces, especially other major powers, US-led international institutions, or external critical infrastructure and knowledge. Thus, China's expansion also involves practices of insulation and minimization of vulnerability. On the other hand, we propose that Chinese practices lead to increasing leverage over various peripheries, fostering the perhaps initially unintended creation of **dependence** of foreign actors and institutions on the PRC, in a broader process we call **peripheralization**.

During the **first funding period**, the complementary expertise of our team of eight project leaders (PLs) from International Relations (IR), International Political Economy (IPE), and China studies will provide an unrivaled opportunity to illuminate Chinese practices in a wide range of fields critical for empire building. By employing qualitative and multi-method research designs, we address the attempts to dominate the semiconductor and artificial intelligence industries in the process of peripheralizing Taiwan (Schubert project); the pursuit of centrality along the value chains for raw materials and green industries (Rabe and ten Brink projects); the establishment of control over critical infrastructure—including finance (Petry), science (Ahlers), digital (Mayer), and outer space (Godehardt)—and lastly, attempts to reshape global ideational environments (Stephen). The projects have similar structures, i.e., they all investigate (1) elite learning, (2) at least one of the five imperial practices introduced above, and (3) their outcomes. On this basis, we evaluate whether and how an imperial elite takes shape in the PRC, how the combination of these practices creates a novel empire and what its defining features are, as well as the outcomes of these practices in terms of autonomy and dependence.

Based on our empirical findings—which are likely to vary across time, fields, and space—a **complementary objective** is to develop our conceptual toolkit into a robust theoretical framework for the study of empire(s), which mainly falls into the **second funding period**.

#	Project title	Project leader	Institution
1	Scientific Empire: Infrastructure Control and Ideational Binding in China's International Big Science Projects	Ahlers, Anna L.	Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin
2	Volumetric Empire: Autonomy and Dependence in Chinese Space Infrastructure Exports	Godehardt, Nadine	German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin
3	Digital Empire: Chinese Imperial Practices and Infrastructure in the Global South	Mayer, Maximilian	University of Bonn
4	Financial Empire: China's Construction of an Alternative Financial System	Petry, Johannes	Goethe University Frankfurt
5	China's Raw Materials Empire: Imperial Practices in Overseas Mineral Extraction and Processing	Rabe, Wiebke A.	University of Bremen
6	Unyielding Empire: China's Quest of Peripheralizing Taiwan	Schubert, Gunter	Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen
7	Ideology of Empire: China's Ideational Binding Practices in Global Governance	Stephen, Matthew D.	Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg
8	Economic Empire: Peripheralization along Chinese-led Green Value Chains	ten Brink, Tobias	Constructor University, Bremen

