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Master's Thesis

2024 **Daniel Olah**

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Subversion as the Modus Operandi

China's integration of influence operations into the Belt and Road Initiative as a mode of disrupting geopolitical powers in Vietnam and Pakistan

Master's thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30 July, 2024 Daniel Olah

References

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Abstract

This thesis examines the intricate interplay between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and subversive Chinese influence operations via the theoretical prism of realist constructivism. Its aim is to support current political science research efforts of bridging a knowledge gap regarding modern tactics and mediums of influence operations. To investigate the presence of subliminal Chinese influence mechanics within the structures of the BRI, a comparative case study for Vietnam and Pakistan was conducted. To comprehensively answer the research questions of this work, two qualitative methods of analysis were combined within the respective case studies. The analytical results indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) applies different methods of overt or clandestine forms of subversion to undermine the geopolitical power of Vietnam and Pakistan. The findings suggest that the CCP achieves this goal mainly with the help of its United Front Work Department (UFWD), which manipulates narratives, coopts international researchers, and recruits informants or other agents of influence. The results of this thesis contribute to the consolidation of the knowledge that Beijing has the ability and intention to instrumentalise the BRI as a medium for the implementation of subliminal influence operations abroad, and that analogue forms of Soviet-era subversion still play an important role today.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese influence operations, Subversion, Active Measures, Geopolitical Power, Vietnam, Pakistan, Narratives, United Front Work Department, Realist Constructivism

Název práce

Subverze jako Modus Operandi. Čínská integrace vlivových operací do iniciativy Pás a stezka jako způsob narušení geopolitických mocností ve Vietnamu a Pákistánu

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
A2/AD	Anti-access/area denial
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CI	Confucius Institute
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
DoD	Department of Defense
INDSR	Institute for National Defense and Security Research
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
LSG	Leading Small Group
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PSC	Private Security Company
SCS	South China Sea
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
UFWD	United Front Work Department
U.S.	United States

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to expand the critical geopolitical literature regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and to add new insights about the intricate nature of contemporary Chinese influence operations. Within this work, the political warfare concept of subversion is particularly relevant, a strategy that allows its user to exert influence over an opponent in a subliminal and often long-term fashion. Applying a comparative and multimethodological approach, the BRI member states Vietnam and Pakistan have been chosen as case studies, due to their vital role in the successful implementation of the initiative. Analysing the probability of subversive mechanics within the framework of the BRI, this thesis is guided by the underlying hypotheses that the infrastructure development initiative actually serves as a gateway mechanism for the implementation of Chinese influence operations, and that Beijing has employed both old and new measures of subversion in Vietnam and Pakistan.

To embed this work into the growing pool of studies regarding China's role in global power competition, the thesis is first firmly anchored within the field of geopolitical research. Next, the theoretical framework incorporates elements from both realism and constructivism, and subsequently J. Samuel Barkin's hybrid angle of analyses called realist constructivism (2003) is introduced. This holistic approach is more suitable to capture the complexity of this thesis and helps to properly contextualise the findings while gauging the CCP's intentions behind the BRI. Containing the main part of the literature review, in Chapter 2 the most important concepts, definitions, and terminology of political warfare are presented, the long history of communist influence operations is outlined, and the emergence of subversion with Chinese characteristics is demonstrated. The key sources for this section are Yuri Bezmenov's explanations of subversion and active measures in the Soviet Union (1983), the analyses about the increasing "Russification" of Chinese influence operations by Charon and Jeangène Vilmer (2021), and several principles from Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* (2000), which are still relevant for contemporary policymakers in Beijing. In Chapter 3, the most important cornerstones of the BRI are highlighted, along with the current state of critical research about the initiative. Next, building on the arguments of this chapter, the choice of Vietnam and Pakistan as case study subjects is outlined in detail, as well

as the research methodology. The multi-method approach first applies a simplified version of a *basic policy analysis* (Patton/Sawicki/Clark 2016), and the resulting insights are used as an interpretative framework for the following *fine structure analysis* (Froschauer/Lueger 2020), by which more nuances from the primary sources can be extracted.

Chapter 4 and 5 contain the independent analysis of Chinese subversion in Vietnam and Pakistan, whereas the findings hopefully contribute to the consolidation of the knowledge that Beijing could instrumentalise the BRI as a medium for the implementation of subliminal influence operations abroad. Supported by a set of circumstantial evidence from the literature, the results of the comparative analysis aim to answer the following three research questions:

1. How are geopolitical, geoeconomic, or geostrategic elements of Chinese subversion integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative?

2. What types of Chinese influence operations could have been trialled or implemented along BRI structures in Vietnam and Pakistan between 2013 and 2023, and by which agents of influence?

3. What are potentially overlooked sharp power blind spots in current BRI-related foreign policy and security research, and how could they be addressed by the academia?

The answers, as well as their implications, are discussed in detail in Chapter 6, and can potentially support the ongoing political science research efforts of filling the knowledge gaps about modern tactics and mediums of influence operations (Bateman et al. 2021). At last, building on the findings of this thesis, multiple recommendations for future research on subversion and influence operations are presented.

1 Geopolitics: Analysing political power through a spatial lens

To adequately assess and discuss the multifaceted topics of this thesis, it is necessary to first contextualize the field of research in which the subsequent analyses are embedded. The study of geopolitics is a multidisciplinary field of research, incorporating elements from political science, international relations (IR), and geography. Emphasising the dynamic and evolving boundaries of what is and what is not part of the actual discipline, Gearóid Ó Tuathail has noticed quite fittingly, that geopolitics is not defined by a definitively clear-cut concept or identity, but by its "discourse [which] is a culturally and politically varied way of describing, representing and writing about geography and international politics." (1998:3).

The controversial reputation of geopolitics as an independent field of research, hails partly from its rooting in geography, which became a discipline on its own around the turn of the twentieth century. As an initially deterministic field of study, geography used to be framed as the geographical substructure for states developing an approach called *realpolitik* towards policy-making and diplomacy, despite its lack of empirically based principles and the absence of moral or ethical reasoning. Later, scholars from Nazi Germany distorted the concept of *geopolitik* into an unbounded pseudoscience, explaining the hesitation of governments and social scientists to further promote research in this field following the Second World War. Despite its shortcomings as a discipline, the true value of modern geopolitical studies as a scholarly field lies within the methodological approach towards analysing international and political relations, via the prism of geographically tangible factors. Whereas these analyses cannot predict the directions statecraft may take, they "present desirable directions and alerts policymakers to the likely impact of their decisions on these relations and interactions." (Cohen 2015:15).

Following the discipline's re-emergence as an accepted field of study, multiple schools of geopolitical thought have developed, either following the Anglo-Saxon tradition or evolving into critical, evolutionary, and systemic schools. Due to the limitations and the scope of this thesis, it is neither intended to delve into the specifics of various schools nor advisable for the subsequent facilitation of an undistorted line of argumentation. The author of this thesis has deemed the rationale of the Anglo-Saxon school as the

most well suited for discussing the contents mentioned hereafter, particularly for two reasons: First, this strain of geopolitical thought is well known to be concerned with the complex dynamics of great power politics, as in the ways and means how dominant sovereign states exert their influence on a global scale. Second, contextualising Beijing's geopolitical strategies through the ideas of the Anglo-Saxon debate – despite its western origin and reasoning – could prove to be useful for interpreting Chinese policy-making. While more indicators for this logic are presented later in this work, this approach is strongly supported by an incident, in which a high-ranking Chinese state official had been recorded referencing (cf. Clinton 2014:71) the "Pivot Area"[1] – one of the epitomes of the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical school. According to Saul Bernard Cohen, one of the proponents of Anglo-Saxon political theory, there are four elements of a nation's (geopolitical) power:

> (1) overwhelming military strength and the willingness to use it; (2) surplus economic energy to enable it to provide aid and invest in other states; (3) ideological leadership that serves as a model for other nations; and (4) a cohesive system of governance. (2015:2)

Analysing these dimensions of power within the context of this thesis, while considering the magnitude and expansive nature of China's BRI, it can be argued that multiple components of this project have the capacity to directly impact at least three out of four elements of a nation's state power, not only for China as its initiator but also for participating countries. Therefore, Cohen's definitions of geopolitical powers are applied later in this work for answering the research questions. Further anchoring the topics of this thesis within the field of geopolitical research, is the circumstance that the BRI's significance is already being evaluated through the lens of great power competition in the 21st century, by the RAND Corporation, one of the world's leading policy think tanks (Cohen et al. 2023).

Having established and contextualised the fundamental geopolitical perimeters of this thesis, the next chapter is devoted to discussing the influential role of realism in international relations and how the manifestation of this political school of thought can be observed in Chinese political behaviour.

[1] In *The Geographical Pivot of History*, Halford John Mackinder (1904) describes the vital role of the "Heartland", an area covering large parts of Eurasia. Any power able to seize total control over this area is bound to become ruler of the world. Reinforcing the idea that the Anglo-Saxon worldview has a substantial influence on Chinese foreign policy and security strategies, is the fact that "Clausewitz, Carr, and Morgenthau are mandatory reading [...]" (Rudd 2013:12) for Beijing's policymakers.

1.1 Realism in international relations theory

The theoretical stream of realism, used to explain, model, and prescribe political relations, is arguably one of the most influential and multifaceted schools of thought in international relations theory. The aim of this brief overview is to outline the most important cornerstones of political realism, introduce concepts relevant for this thesis, and highlight realist logic and behaviour in Chinese foreign policy formulation.

Political realism has a long tradition, dating back more than two millennia. Ancient Athenian historian and general Thucydides has become renowned within the academic sphere of IR for his poignant and analytical evaluations of political behaviour during the Peloponnesian War. The ideas of Renaissance diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli, best known for his political treatise *Il Principe* (English: The Prince), to this day influence the decisions of ruthless politicians aiming to bypass ethical considerations in statecraft. Despite this long and diverse history, there are four common assumptions which many contemporary realist schools entail in their argumentation. Following Jack Donnelly's summary of the realist tradition, these commonalities can be found: 1) State-centrism: States are the most important actors in international politics; influential leaders or transnational organisations are less relevant. 2) Anarchy: The international system is anarchic, with no overarching authority to regulate competition. 3) Rational Egoism: States – seen as unitary actors – only act in their rational self-interest. 4) Power: States seek to maximise their power to ensure their survival; ethical or moral principles cannot be applied to state actions (2000:6-8). As these assumptions of state behaviour are rather generalised, the theoretical framework of this thesis is now further narrowed down, in order to strengthen the assumption about China's inclination towards realist policy-making.

Neorealism, also called structural realism, is a theoretical stream within the contemporary IR debate, which further emphasises the postulate of power politics in the world and explains the perpetual state of intra- and interstate conflict with the prevalent anarchy in the international system (Jervis 1999:42-44). Significantly shaping the discourse around neorealism was Kenneth Waltz's book *Man, the State, and War* (1959), in which he established the "three images of analysis". These three images are analogies for the individual, the state, and the international system, which

are all contributing factors towards conflict in international politics. Upon deeper reflection on Waltz's remarks, these three images show remarkable similarities to China's behaviour as a state, especially when attempting to interpret the current administration's demeanour: Over the recent years, Xi Jinping has increasingly shaped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into a tightly controlled, personalist organisation. His human nature (ego) makes him long for control and security, rendering his decision-making capabilities less objective and prone to mistakes, due to misperceptions and miscalculations about the world (cf. Waltz 1959). This view of China's leader, embodying a fragile and unpredictable version of Waltz's first image, is supported by the idea, that due to Xi Jinping's traumatic youth[2], the now adult head of state might be driven by an irrational vision of security maximisation for himself and the country.

Defining an appropriate Chinese "equivalent" for Waltz's second image – the state – is a more challenging task, as there are numerous factors influencing the ways a certain state behaves. However, Waltz himself, drawing upon historical parallels, provided a possible explanation as to why states choose to engage in external conflicts, when he wrote that "[w]ar most often promotes the internal unity of each state involved" (1959:81). Now, even if China is currently not engaged in armed conflict, the authoritarian regime still requires a "valve" through which it can channel intrastate pressures and imbalances. In the absence of popular elections, constituting one possible form of dealing with internal struggles, Beijing opts to artificially provoke external threats in order to divert attention from domestic issues. Therefore, to justify an increasingly assertive and confrontational logic in foreign policy behaviour, over the recent years Chinese diplomats have started to act according to a political concept called "Major Country Diplomacy" (Smith 2021).

Concluding this line of argumentation, it is exactly the notion of China's "Major Country Diplomacy" that leads to Waltz's third realist image: The international system. Unable to predict other states' intentions and with no sovereign body to govern relations

[2] From a behavioural perspective, it would be sheer academic negligence to dismiss the idea that the pandemonium of the Cultural Revolution had no uprooting effect on the adolescent Xi Jinping, while also deeply shaping his worldview: His father was purged from the Communist Party and repeatedly beaten, his mother had to publicly denounce him as an enemy of the revolution in front of crowds, and one of his sisters died in the tumults (Buckley/Tatlow 2015).

between autonomous nation-states, China, in its quest for survival, has significantly augmented its position within the international system. Smith reflects upon this Waltzian dilemma for China, when he argues:

> [...] that previously held boundaries of state action have been dramatically expanded under Xi Jinping to now include efforts to proactively reform international order, engage in ideological competition with the West, and assume greater responsibility for global affairs in accordance with its elevated power and status. (2021:2)

These increasingly proactive and often aggressive political principles have manifested in various ways over the recent years, most prominently observable in the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), the reinvigorated sabre-rattling against Taiwan, and the repeated application of so-called “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” (ibid.:9f.) on behalf of China. The resulting impact on both the regional and international political system emphasises Beijing’s strong inclination towards realist policy-making, thus all three levels of analysis proposed by Waltz are met.

To complement the picture of China’s realist behaviour, another important factor ought to be considered when aiming to outline why Chinese political realism is probably of such a deeply rooted nature: Confucianism. Evolved from the teachings of Confucius, it is a philosophy of life that includes ethical, social and political elements. Despite its decline in relevance after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, and the initial rejection of the philosophy by the communists during the Cultural Revolution, the core principles of Confucianism have been successfully revived by the CCP since Xi Jinping entered office. This resurgence of Confucianism has in fact been so strong, that recent findings suggest that it “has had a significant impact on current Chinese policy [...] further securing [the CCP’s] right to rule and enhance a more assertive foreign policy abroad.” (Zhao 2018:321). This political assertiveness, amplified by Confucianism’s emphasis on power, authority, and order, additionally reflects Beijing’s realist policy-making ideology, as it was outlined by Zbigniew Brzezinski who described the philosophy as “imperially expedient” (1997:9).

In this chapter, multiple angles of Chinese realist political practice have been illuminated, as well as the role of Confucianism as a potentially reinforcing philosophy for realism. To contrast the realist elements of the theoretical framework, the next chapter highlights the application of social constructivism in Chinese politics.

1.2 The importance of social constructivism for norms and institutions

The aim of this chapter is to add a different perspective to this thesis' theoretical framework, which is done to highlight that not every aspect of Beijing's policy-related decision-making process is solely governed by realist impulses. This is insofar important, as some of the overarching mechanisms – regarding the implementation of the BRI discussed in Chapter 1.3 – require a more ideational lens of analysis, provided by a social theory such as constructivism.

The core concept of constructivism revolves around the idea that norms, ideas, and institutions significantly impact international politics, and the way states relate to each other. Some of the key arguments of the constructivist school in IR contain the following ideas: 1) Ideas and norms structurally shape the perceptions of actors in the world, and while agents create structures, structures create agents. 2) Regulative and constitutive norms define the legitimate scope of action for actors; however, meanings are not indefinitely fixed and are susceptible to influence from cultural developments and political ideologies (Barnett 2014:156ff.). 3) Power can not only be defined by actor A's ability to make actor B do something they would not do otherwise, but also by A's ability to produce "identities, interests, and meanings that limit the ability of actors to control their fate" (ibid.:162). The common denominator of these arguments, and of social constructivism in general, is the continuous task of asking questions about why we do things the way we do them, and how an alternative worldview could create new pathways in life. Despite this emphasis on approaching the status quo of IR from a different angle, an important caveat needs to be mentioned first: Constructivism is not a substantive theory of international politics – like for example neorealism – but can be described as an alternative social theory framework "to conceptualize the relationship between agents and structures" (ibid.:157).

How can such a different framework be applied to analyse Chinese policy-making, when it has been outlined in chapter 1.1 that Beijing apparently favours a realist worldview? Two indicators suggest that Chinese policymakers increasingly acknowledge the value of constructivist practices: The CCP's proactive influence on international norms and its intensified multilateral institution-building. China's impact on norm dynamics becomes most visible when juxtaposed to a constructivist concept

called the “norm life cycle”. Introduced by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, the authors outline that the evolution of norms follows a three-stage process. First, so-called “norm entrepreneurs” push for a new norm to emerge until a “tipping” point has been reached. The acceptance of a new norm by a broad mass of actors constitutes a “norm cascade”, which is the second stage. The third stage is reached when both actors and the sociopolitical system have internalised a new norm (1998:895f.). Within this constructivist comparison, Beijing is the agent whose goal is to shape the international political structure according to its ideas. Following China’s adaption of “Major Country Diplomacy”, it has been observed both by policymakers and political scientists that Beijing is increasingly invested in its task to export authoritarianism to developing countries (cf. Young 2021). This strategy could be interpreted as Beijing’s attempt to establish a new set of international norms regarding the legitimate use of authoritarian tools of governance. The CCP could be tempted to tap into the current wave of global authoritarianization (cf. Ohlsson 2022) and steer the political discourse towards the “‘tipping’ point, at which a critical mass of relevant state[s] adopt the norm” (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998:895).

The second indicator of China’s apparent commitment to a (partially) constructivist course of action is Beijing’s intensified development of and participation in international organisations and institutions, especially under the Xi administration. The most notable examples of Chinese multilateral institution-building are the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Council on Foreign Relations has outlined in detail that Beijing’s efforts to establish an alternative network of legitimate institutions can be regarded as China’s approach to global governance and a way to challenge existing international norms and rules (2024). This increased Chinese focus on the influential power of international organisations challenges the realist assumptions of the predetermined anarchy in the international system made in the previous chapter, and underlines Beijing’s capability to adapt its foreign policy strategies in accordance with constructivist values. Having outlined that constructivist thinking does play an important role in China’s foreign policy behaviour, in the next chapter I synthesise these findings with Beijing’s realist worldview to embed the subsequent analyses of the BRI into an amalgamated theoretical framework called realist constructivism (cf. Barkin 2003).

1.3 Realist constructivism – A hybrid framework for assessing China's approach towards policy-making

The purpose of this chapter is to strengthen the argument that when considered separately, both realism and constructivism as theoretical frameworks fall short of capturing certain nuances of geopolitical mechanisms behind an extensive infrastructure development programme like the BRI. As a hybrid theory, realist constructivism could help to redefine the borders within which the discourse around Chinese policy-making rationale can take place. Is China governed by a power-hungry and realist administration? Most certainly. But are the decision-makers in Beijing capable of genuine international cooperation and rational policy-making compatible with international norms? A part of the answer might lie in a century-old Chinese concept of governance called *Tianxia.*

Before outlining the concept of *Tianxia* and its relevance to this thesis, a brief discussion is required as to why realist constructivism constitutes such an insightful theoretical framework. Whereas many scholars in the field of IR perceive realism and constructivism to be in direct opposition to each other and thus conceptually incompatible, J. Samuel Barkin argues that an approach that combines both theories "could study the relationship between normative structures, the carriers of political morality, and uses of power." (2003:338). While the realist school of thought, as a whole, has been strongly influenced by the contemporary neorealist emphasis on power politics, and the field of IR suffers from "terminological confusion" (ibid.:326), Barkin suggests a (partial) return to the roots of realism:

> The classical realists argued quite explicitly that moral ideals are an integral and necessary part of the practice of international politics and that political realism in the absence of morality, in the absence of a vision of utopia, is both sterile and pointless. A realist constructivism would, thus, serve to help rehabilitate idealism by requiring as its corollary a self-consciously idealist constructivism and by contending that the study of ideals, as well as ideas, is integral to a full understanding of international politics. (ibid.:336)

Emphasising that morals, idealism, and a certain sense of utopia are key components for a deeper understanding of global political debates, it can be argued that Barkin's realist constructivism aims to provide a more unified angle of analysis. This sense of a somewhat benevolent unity is the necessary pivot which elevates the Chinese realist constructivism into a comparable position to the *Tianxia* system, where important parallels in idealistic policy-making start to appear.

Tianxia, which translates to “under heaven”, is an ancient Chinese cultural concept which described either the entire physical world or the spiritual domain of humans, and eventually became associated with political sovereignty. At its core, the concept claims that the land, the sea, and the space are all divinely appointed to the Chinese sovereign, whereby regions located further away from the Chinese imperial court were classified as tributary states or even barbarians. Within this concept, the “Son of Heaven” – chosen by the Mandate of Heaven – would nominally be the ruler of the entire world[3]. Recently, this Chinese idea of all-encompassing governance has been revitalised and popularised by writer Zhao Tingyang in his book titled *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, in which he describes the utopian system as fundamentally different from western-style imperial dominance, as it is characterised by harmony and cooperation without hegemony (cf. 2021). This notion of utopia, and the typically communist choice of words, constitute one of the key similarities to the Belt and Road Initiative.

When the BRI was initiated more than a decade ago, the State Council of the People's Republic of China vaguely outlined the proclaimed goals of their ambitious initiative for infrastructure development and enhanced connectivity. Nonetheless, on the official government Belt and Road Initiative webpage entry, the Council not only used the term cooperation more than 128 (!) times but also claimed that the BRI will create “harmony, peace and prosperity” (2015) among participating nations. To highlight how realist constructivism could help to capture the complex and multilayered nature of Chinese policy-making rationale, Figure 1 visualises the conceptual elements that presumably guide policymakers in Beijing. Analysing China’s motivations in international projects from a more holistically oriented angle, it becomes clear that development initiatives – such as the BRI – are rooted in and inseparable from underlying Chinese cultural and political dynamics, which might not seem relevant at first glance. However, it is important to clarify that this thesis is not meant to test this theory empirically, but to provide a viable alternative to the more commonly applied theoretical approaches in geopolitical sciences.

[3] Despite not claiming the title “Son of Heaven” explicitly himself, various media outlets appear to manifest narrative parallels between Xi Jinping and former Chinese emperors. Xi’s overall megalomaniac leadership style, strongman politics, and unprecedented third term as president further feed the notion of China’s current supreme leader being chosen by the Heavens to restore the Middle Kingdom to its imperial glory (cf. Schuman 2022; cf. Young 2023).

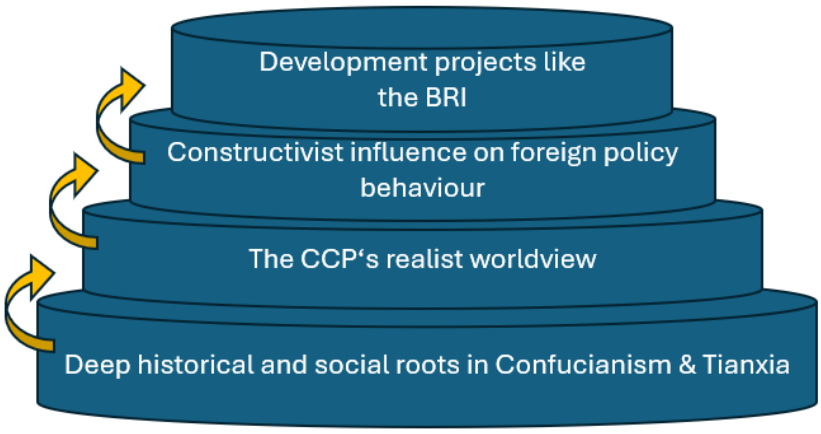

Figure 1 Underlying elements of Chinese policy-making rationale utilising an interpretive framework of realist constructivism (Source: Author's illustration)

A prime example of locating the BRI within this amalgamated theoretical framework is to contextualise the role of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a financial facilitator and institutional "catalyst" of trust. Understanding that for the lasting international acceptance of a project like the BRI trust-building measures are vital, Beijing first had to establish a more respectable image via organisational and institutional bodies. Propagating China's desired narrative of its "legitimate" (cf. Smith 2021) expansion of global influence, the AIIB plays the role of an interstate institutional mediator tasked to dampen doubts and suspicions of BRI partner countries regarding Chinese intentions. On the one hand, the AIIB and other institutions associated with the BRI will continuously emphasise their development of a "more prosperous, equitable economic order across the Asia-Pacific region" (Firzli 2015), perfectly in line with constructivist and idealistic values. On the other hand, the CCP's deeply realist worldview systematically subverts these institutions with increasing normative powers, rendering them into mere puppets constructed to aid Beijing in its goal to "undermine Western democracies" (Brewster 2023).

After discussing the relevance of realist constructivism as an analytical framework and the potential narrative influence of ancient concepts such as *Tianxia* on contemporary Chinese policy-making, the next step is the contextualisation of China's extensive application of political warfare. To highlight this ethically and morally unbounded Chinese approach towards foreign policy-making, the next chapters will outline why, how, and by what means Beijing utilises political warfare to reach its political goals as well as to safeguard its growing national security interests.

2 Political warfare: The art of undermining the competition

Political warfare has a long and rich history and has been employed for millennia by various civilisations all around the globe to push or coerce opponents into a desirable course of action compatible with one's own national interests. Despite a broad and diverse range of political warfare measures such as white or black propaganda, psychological operations, or disinformation, these coordinated actions are united by a common characteristic which is "essentially hostile to the constitutional structure of the existing state in the target area." (Smith 1989:3). However, for the academic study of political warfare, it is noteworthy to mention that the analysis and understanding of these "organisational weapons" is "an art, not a science" (ibid.:6), as due to their complex and obscure nature a significant amount of experience is required of researchers for a proper contextualisation.

In this work, it is not intended to discuss the entire range of political warfare tactics available to resourceful regimes, but to give special attention to approaches that are rather clandestine, marked by long-term implementation periods, and aimed at the disruption of a target state's geopolitical powers outlined in Chapter 1. For example, the Soviet Union believed that such measures could show "significant cumulative effect[s] over a period of several decades." (Bittman 1985:43ff.). But why do governments even employ such lengthy and often cost-expensive warfare tactics? In the case of some contemporary authoritarian regimes aided by institutional continuity[4], the reasons are twofold: On the one hand, the covert versions of political warfare usually give the aggressor state the ability to claim plausible deniability via deliberate disinformation or the lack of tangible evidence. On the other hand, in the absence of readily identifiable military action, China's "Three Warfares" doctrine, for example, allows Beijing to "undermine international institutions, change borders, and subvert global media, all without firing a shot" (Jackson 2015:5). Considering these dimensions of application within the same realm as Clausewitz' famous notion that "[w]ar is merely the continuation of policy by other means" (1984:87), one might arrive at the following conclusion: Political warfare is a necessitated intermediate step, attempting to refrain

[4] Institutional continuity in the context of authoritarian regimes refers to a dynamic, which in the absence of popular votes and the associated deviation from a certain political course, often sees the (expected) continuation of specific policies by successive regimes (cf. Fewsmith 2012), which is especially useful when ongoing influence operations are to be maintained.

from violent casualties but not shying away from escalating measures either (cf. Codevilla/Seabury 2005).

Narrowing down the argumentative and analytical line, there are specific reasons to believe that China is using every opportunity available to conduct political warfare in the form of influence operations, including the "misappropriation" of the organisational and implementing bodies of the BRI. Firstly, political warfare for the CCP, in general, is to be seen as a permanent and widely applicable activity aimed at reinforcing national identity while simultaneously weakening the opposition, and "waged daily under the guise of peace" (Heinlein 1974:1). Secondly, various news reports published in late 2023 suggested that China's actual armed capabilities (referring to the PLA Rocket Force) might be severely handicapped by decade-long rampant corruption and misappropriation of military equipment (cf. Tran 2024)[5]. If true, such an assumption raises the question of whether the CCP is pursuing alternative means of exerting its power over regional nation-states, aimed at influencing targets more subtly in the background while weakening them from the inside. Thirdly, due to the significance of political warfare as an integral part of Chinese foreign policy-making, it is not unlikely that Beijing is even willing to compromise the international credibility of the BRI, in an effort to instrumentalise cooperative projects abroad for its own gains. This train of thought is guided by the following notion: A government that "views gray zone activities as natural extensions of how countries exercise power" (Lin et al. 2022), is increasingly building suspicious *crematories* (!) near Uyghur detention camps (Techjournalist 2020) and has likely endorsed the systematic organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners in China (Matas/Kilgour 2009), has probably fewer ethical or moral considerations regarding the application malicious influence operations. Before further discussing the history of Chinese political warfare as well as the contemporary operationalisation of subversive activities in Chapter 2.2, the next chapter introduces key concepts of subliminal political influence and illuminates how the CCP emulates and continues the Soviet "tradition" of influence operations.

[5] Unfortunately, for the public such reportings are indistinguishable from skilful Chinese disinformation, crafted to potentially pretend weakness where is none. However, as both Beijing and its opponents are aware that armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific region would be incredibly costly and devastating (cf. Sawant 2021; cf. McCoy 2023), it is evident that China will exhaust all other options of warfaring before resorting to military action.

2.1 Subversion, active measures, and sharp power – The long history of communist influence operations

Certain types of influence operations as part of political warfare have always played a role in the foreign policy strategy of powerful nations. Moreover, during the second half of the 20th century, the opposing blocs of the Cold War have directed an unprecedented amount of resources on both the practice and research of political warfare tools. However, following the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the academic interest on the topic of influence operations has been in relative decline for decades[6], as the US-led Western bloc perceived the challenging influence of communist ideology to be over. Fast-forward to the second decade of this century, a look behind the scenes is enough to notice that influence operations still play an important role in major power politics today. For example, Russian fraudulent interference with the 2016 United States presidential election has been described by "many officials and experts [as] a trial run meant to probe American defenses and identify weaknesses" (Rosenberg/Perlroth/Sanger 2020) in the democratic voting system. Similarly, former US President Donald Trump has recently informed the public that during his tenure the CIA has conducted a "covert influence operation against China" (Schectman/Bing 2024). To highlight how China carries on the Soviet legacy of systematic and far-reaching aggressive political warfare conducted by the Communist bloc, the historical origins and important concepts of past and present influence operations are presented below.

According to former U.S. intelligence officer Paul W. Blackstock, the process of political warfare in the aggressor-victim relationship is generally defined by three interconnected stages. During the first stage, the aggressor penetrates or infiltrates political and social groups in the target country in order to extend its own influence and control. This process goes beyond the internationally accepted influence of diplomatic channels and includes espionage (1964:44). The second stage consists of the target state's forceful disintegration, which "is the breakdown of the political and social structure of the victim until the fabric of national morale disintegrates and the state is

[6] This assessment is based on the author's observation, that large parts of the professional and exhaustive literature regarding subversion, active measures, or state-induced influence operations predates the fall of the Soviet Union. Supporting this argument is Rosenau's notion that "more [contemporary] research is needed, since the systematic study of subversion has long been neglected." (2007:13).

unable to resist further intervention" (ibid.:50). In the third stage, which is also the namesake of this thesis, Blackstock describes *subversion* as the following concept:

> Subversion is the undermining or detachment of the loyalties of significant political and social groups within the victimized state, and their transference, under ideal conditions, to the symbols and institutions of the aggressor. (ibid.:56)

Despite various definitions of subversion due to its elastic nature and dependence on cultural or historic context, the intended result of its application usually follows the same logic: While from the official perspective – as in "on paper" – and for the public these groups of interest are still loyal to their home country, they have been secretly coopted or have already pledged allegiance with the aggressor and now serve as subversive agents. Blackstock further determines that the ultimate targets of persuasion are the ruling political and social elites "since they control the physical instruments of state power" (ibid.:57).

To further illuminate the significance of subversion in the foreign policy strategy of the Soviet Union, key concepts and ideas are extracted from a revealing lecture on the subject delivered in the early 1980s. Yuri Bezmenov, also known under his alias Tomas Schuman, was a former Soviet journalist for the Novosti Press Agency (APN) and a member of the KGB Soviet mission in New Delhi. During his time in India, he became dissatisfied with the Soviet system and defected to Canada in 1970 with the help of the CIA. Bezmenov later moved to Los Angeles and began publishing his knowledge because "[he] wanted people to know what was really going on in [the Soviet Union]" (Windsor Star 1993). During his lecture in Los Angeles, he educated the listeners on the schematic life-cycle of Soviet subversive activities in the West and ascertained the following facts: According to his observations, there seems to be a common misconception about the goals and desires of the KGB. Despite the romanticised perpetuation by Hollywood and misinformed "experts", the true objective of the Soviet intelligence services is not to "steal blueprints of some supersonic jet" or to "blow up bridges", but the subversion of Western civilisations (Bezmenov 1983). As Bezmenov explains, a strong indicator for this is the aspect of resource allocation, as KGB espionage activities only occupy about 10-15% of money, time, and manpower, while the remaining 85% are all devoted to subversion.[7] Due to the circulated cliché of

[7] These numbers should be treated with extreme caution, as there is no way to prove the accurateness of this claim. However, as outlined in the next chapter, the budgetary situation of modern Chinese

Soviet espionage, as he puts it, the public and the media pay less attention to actual subversion, because in the understanding of the western law-enforcement systems, the majority of readily observable subversive activities are not per se a crime. Of major significance in the process of subversion, is the initial stage of *demoralisation* of the target society. This phase, which can last anywhere from 15 to 20 years, constitutes the period of time it takes to influence, educate, and shape the perceptions of a generation in a way which is more favourable for the objectives of the subverter. Capitalising on antagonistic movements in the target state during this period, the originator of subversion will utilise various agents to aid the disintegration of established moral principles and values. With the help of coopted students, journalists, actors, or artists, the subverter aims to influence different contested areas of life in the target society, such as religion, education, social life, labour relations, or law and order (ibid.) After multiple stages and layers of subversion, which are too complex to be discussed in all their details at this point, the desired final outcome of this subliminal aggressor-victim relationship is that the "perception of reality of your enemy is screwed up to such an extent that he does not perceive you as an enemy" (ibid.). The notion, that this statement carries, becomes particularly visible when juxtaposed with "China's peaceful rise" policy (cf. Joske 2022), a narrative construct that is further examined in Chapter 2.2.

To ensure that the process of Soviet subversion is moving into the desired direction, Moscow also employed more hands-on tactics called *active measures* (Romanised Russian: *aktivnye meropriyatiya*). Conducted hand in hand with more "passive" subversive activities, active measures included operations such as the establishment of international front organisations, for example the World Peace Council, worldwide promotion, training, and equipment of guerrilla factions, installation of puppet regimes, or political assassinations (cf. Andrew/Mitrokhin 2000). Retired KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin explained in an interview that active measures were ultimately designed to "drive wedges in the Western community alliances of all sorts [...] sow discord among allies [...] and thus to prepare ground in case the war really occurs." (CNN 1998). To showcase the level of sophistication of Soviet active measures, the most

intelligence services supports Bezmenov's argument that regimes employing systematic subversive strategies are willing to devote an extraordinary amount of resources for subliminal influence operations.

important cornerstones of *Operation Denver* are presented hereafter. Also known as *Operation INFEKTION*, this active measure disinformation campaign was designed by the KGB to disseminate the idea that the United States had invented and was thus responsible for the global spread of HIV/AIDS. With the help of other intelligence services from the Communist bloc, especially the East German Stasi (cf. Boghardt 2009), the KGB undertook an "extraordinary amount of effort – funding radio programs, courting journalists, distributing would-be scientific studies – in order 'to make the elaborate lie look real'" (Yaffa 2020). Further bolstering the credibility of this narrative, the KGB oversaw the news coverage in 80 countries in more than 30 languages, while carefully covering its tracks by only allowing Soviet outlets to pick up the stories after they had been published by foreign sources, which were not known to be controlled by Moscow (cf. United States Department of State 1987). Nonetheless, active measures were no miracle tool for the unnoticed meddling with the political and security environment of foreign nations, as blowbacks for the initiator were a reality "in which the operator [was] partially or completely exposed and subjected to countermeasures taken by the government of the target country" (Bittman 1985:49-52).

Even though both subversion and active measures are still practised today, the addition of a more contemporary concept can help to contextualise how political warfare has been adapted to better match the informational environments of our time. Popularising the term in 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has introduced the concept of *sharp power*. Constituting a manipulative approach to diplomatic policy-making, the NED described the application of sharp power by authoritarian regimes as "'sharp' in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information and political environments in the targeted countries" (2017). Explaining the success of sharp power, policy analyst Christopher Walker outlines that the concept "takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems" (2018:17), meaning that while authoritarian governments can distort the informational environments of free and open democracies, they can simultaneously limit the access to public spaces domestically. Highlighting the role of inconspicuous cultural or educational organisations, such as the Confucius Institutes, Shiau-Shyang Liou (Chinese: 劉蕭翔) from the Taiwanese Institute for National Defense and Security

Research (INDSR) describes the concept as a “non-traditional mixed security threat” and states:

> Sharp power may seem different from the previous dichotomy between soft power and hard power, but it sometimes shares only a fine line with soft power. For example, China’s sharp power has the coercive characteristic of hard power, but is packaged within soft power. (2020:98)

Taking into account this latest chapter of political warfare, where it increasingly has become a balancing act of distinguishing between assertive but still legitimate acts of diplomacy and malicious political manipulation, how can the analysis of Soviet-era strategies help to understand contemporary Chinese influence operations better?

First and foremost, it is necessary to spotlight the origins of “modern” Chinese political warfare, which are to be found in the early years of the 20th century. Describing the significant role of the Soviet Union in this development, political scientist Joseph J. Heinlein Jr. wrote in his PhD thesis that “[b]oth the Nationalist and Communist Chinese political warfare doctrines stem from the same historical antecedents at the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924 under Soviet tutelage” (1974:3). This clue indicates that despite the definitive Sino-Soviet split in 1961, which subsequently saw the two former brethren drifting apart ideologically, Moscow managed to lay the groundwork for future influence operations with Chinese characteristics. More importantly, there is not only growing evidence that Soviet-era political warfare strategies have been resurrected by modern-day Russia (cf. Juurvee 2018; cf. Galeotti 2019), but there are numerous indicators that Beijing has begun imitating the influential ways and means of its former mentor. In their meticulously researched contribution, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment,* the French political scientists Charon and Jeangène Vilmer describe that despite Beijing's efforts to maintain its benevolent and respectable image on the international stage, there is a noticeable “Russification of Chinese operations” (2021:620) underway. They go on to detail that the PLA’s efforts to emulate the Russian model of political warfare now include “clandestine informational operations on Western social networks [, the attempt] to divide and sow discord in target countries [or the circulation of] conspiracy theories” (ibid.:623-626). The resemblance to the Soviet-era practice of subversion and active measures is evident.

To conclude this chapter, one thing needs to be emphasised: The aim of the paragraph above is not to imply that Moscow and Beijing have begun undermining the rest of the world in a concerted effort. Despite Charon's and Jeangène Vilmer's suggestion that the contemporary security services of the two countries are probably "exchanging information, and perhaps 'good practices'" (ibid.:637), the reasoning here is that while from the Western perspective the "Red Scare" propagated under McCarthy has faded, China has implicitly continued the communist tradition of subversive influence operations. The acknowledgement that these practices from the Cold War period have stayed alive and are still relevant today could prove invaluable for contemporary research on geopolitical security issues caused by China. Even though Russian and Chinese malign influence activities used to have different objectives (cf. Conley et al. 2020), the convergence of their approaches is a relatively novel phenomenon. If researchers would proactively consider the intertwined historical roots of these two distinct but related ways of waging political warfare in their studies, analyses could be conducted in tandem to draw insights from a larger universe of information and potentially provide more precise counterintelligence recommendations with higher external validity. An example of how this knowledge could be implemented is presented in Chapter 5, in which the presumable Chinese practice of a Soviet-era tactic of subversion in Pakistan is discussed in detail. The following Chapter 2.2 is dedicated to outlining China's history of political warfare briefly and presents various tools, techniques, agents, and examples of subversion with Chinese characteristics.

2.2 Subversion with Chinese characteristics: 這是什麼?

It is not an exaggeration to state that the mastery of warfare is a skilful art that has been honed in China for thousands of years. Accidentally unearthed during construction works in the 1970s, the re-discovery of Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* has led to the increased contemporary study of ancient Chinese warfaring philosophies. Tzu's thoughts on military strategy provide excellent insight into a mindset that strongly emphasises strategising as a key part of warfare, going hand in hand with elusive and deceptive tactics to outwit an opponent. Unsurprisingly, this deeply ingrained cultural knowledge of asymmetrical warfare – devised during the Warring States period – has persisted and subsequently shaped Chinese communist political warfare strategies during the 20th century. In the following, some of Tzu's

remarks are presented, and how the CCP has internalised them for a modern application.

In Chapter 3 of his book, Tzu emphasises that when it comes to stratagems of attack, a “skilful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting [and] overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field” (2000:9). This angle of warfare, which favours the non-military undermining of opponents over armed combat, is also reflected in the PLA’s contemporary “Three Warfares” doctrine. Essentially following Blackstock’s concept of subversion discussed in the previous chapter, this doctrine employs public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare (cf. Jackson 2015). Despite talking about actual troop movements, Tzu figuratively also touched upon the policy of divide and rule. His notion, to “drive a wedge between the enemy's front and rear [and keep the enemy troops] in disorder” (ibid.:48), strongly resembles the Soviet and now Chinese rationale behind active measures. Tzu’s belief in the extensive use of spies is particularly relevant to the contemporary contextualisation of subversion with Chinese characteristics. He distinguished between different types of spies, such as locally recruited external spies, inward spies who are foreign officials, or enemy spies who have been converted and can now be exploited to relay false information. Highlighting the extraordinary significance of such a subversive system of agents, Tzu writes that “[w]hen these [spies] are all at work, none can discover the secret system. This is called ‘divine manipulation of the threads’. It is the sovereign's most precious faculty.” (ibid.:60). It is exactly these ideas of coordinated, secret, and undiscoverable manipulation, that are the main constituents of a successful modern operation of subversion, resulting in an enemy’s distorted reality (cf. Bezmenov 1983). But how does the CCP manages such an intricate system of subversive influence, and how has it become Beijing’s *modus operandi*[8] in its foreign policy strategy?

Despite the inability to pinpoint specific subversive policies, as they are never officially formulated due to their highly controversial nature, certain trends in the CCP’s policy-making architecture do indicate a growing institutionalisation and capacity building for

[8] This choice of terminology is not coincidental and serves a specific purpose: Particularly used in the context of business or criminal investigations, the modus operandi describes an individual’s preferred mode of operation (cf. Douglas/Burgess/Burgess/Ressler 2006). As outlined in this chapter, there are multiple indicators to believe that malign influence operations are indeed one of the CCP’s primary assignments in foreign policy-making.

influence operations. One of the most promising leads is the observable rejuvenation and expansion of united front activities. The united front is one of the CCP's central political strategies to influence and control groups within and outside the party system. Historically developed as a popular front strategy, promotion of and participation in united front activities today are mandatory for all CCP cadres (cf. Brady 2017). The central body for the coordination and management of united front operations is the United Front Work Department (UFWD). The Australian author and intelligence researcher Alex Joske has outlined that since the initiation of reforms in 2015 by General Secretary Xi Jinping, the UFWD has been increasingly centralised and coordinated in order to improve efficiency. For the implementation of this restructuring process, a Leading Small Group[9] (LSG) was created, which not only oversaw the first-ever trials of formal regulation over united front work, but also ensured that "bureaucratic departments with divergent interests [were limited in] their scope for bargaining" (2019). The significance of this development for the continued warranty of institutionalised influence operations can be reinforced by another set of tangible data: Budgetary allocations. Despite the lack of verifiable information, as the UFWD does not disclose its annual budget and continually attempts to downplay its own role, the combination of numerous budget and expense reports has led researchers to the revelation that "organizations central to China's national and regional united front systems spent more than $2.6 billion in 2019, exceeding funding for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Fedasiuk 2020). Disregarding the official narrative promoted by Beijing, these two indicators underline China's apparent preference for unofficial influence operations over the formal cultivation of international diplomatic relations.

While the UFWD is an important standalone component of China's systematic influence operations, its operational capacity and reach is further amplified via close cooperation with the Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS). Intelligence research has unveiled, that this interagency exchange has led the MSS to instrumentalise the UFWD and associated organisations as cover for intelligence agents (cf. Joske 2020). The proximity of these two agencies could also lead to the problematic overlap of

[9] Leading Small Groups are *ad hoc* interagency executive committees of the CCP, tasked with decision-making on major functional issue areas. Including various bodies of government, party, and military systems, these cross-system LSG's do not only bypass conventional practices of policy formulation within the CCP, but ultimately allow Xi Jinping to overrule the Politburo while further centralising power on himself (Tsai/Wang 2019).

ideological convictions: The UFWD's main task abroad is the cooptation of interest groups and surveillance of the overseas Chinese diaspora, thus its organisational worldview still allows for a relative degree of constructive cooperation (see Chapter 1.2). The MSS mainly functions as China's intelligence, security and secret police agency, and according to sinologists Peter Mattis and Matthew Brazil, is guided by its strong ideological heritage of revolutionary communism. The authors describe these "bastions of faith" as operating under the following modus operandi:

> Although they may be practical in terms of techniques and methods to acquire intelligence, this information is filtered through a Marxist–Leninist lens. The implication is that foreign targets are viewed in the worst possible light. (2019:39)

This notion of apparent Xenophobia in the Chinese intelligence community could have grave consequences for the operational outcome in the cooperative process with other governmental bodies. To complement the line of argumentation regarding the increasingly institutionalised character of Chinese influence operations, it needs to be mentioned that the implementation of the BRI is also overseen by an LSG: The Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative. Established by the PRC's State Council as a review and coordination body, over the last decade it has constantly been headed by the highest echelons of central leadership, signifying this LSG's importance for Beijing. To illustrate how the UFWD and the MSS probably utilise the BRI's leading small group interagency character to further extend their influence within the united front strategy abroad, Figure 2 depicts Xi Jinping's vision of an all-encompassing and interconnected united front network.

From an organisational standpoint of view, the maintenance of such an extensive intelligence system definitely makes sense. Rosenau has described that subversive operations are manpower-intensive, and that other groups engaged in asymmetrical warfare – but without institutional backing – often lack the necessary "personnel to engage in such activities" (2007:5). The fact that an estimated 150,000 employees work for the MSS and UFWD combined further complements the picture in which Beijing has created all the necessary prerequisites for well-equipped and wide-ranging influence operations.

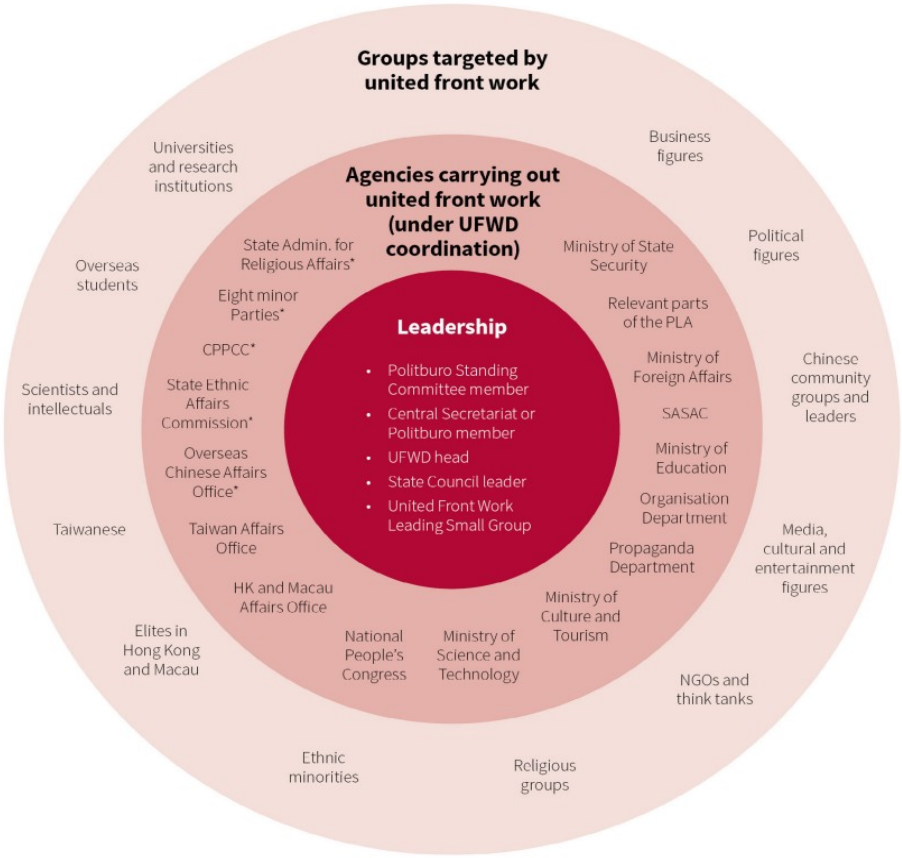

Figure 2 The united front system (Joske 2020:9)

When it comes to the operationalisation of subversive influence operations, the CCP and the UFWD utilise multiple strategic levers to undermine target societies. Completely different in nature but united in their goal, the following two examples are meant to outline the variety of these levers. Despite its special political status in the Chinese sphere of interest, an analysis of how Beijing managed to undermine the liberal civil society in Hong Kong in just a few decades, can help to grasp the applied form of subversion. Through the coordination of the Hong Kong Liaison office, the UFWD has primarily targeted and coopted grassroots organisations, elderly citizens, and migrant populations, in order to create a sophisticated machinery that facilitates highly coordinated voting behaviour. Additionally infiltrating and steering the academic and professional spheres, "turned" elites have been tasked with shaping public opinion on important political and policy issues, with the result that nowadays only pro-Beijing candidates are elected to the Legislative Council (Lee 2020). The undermining character of Chinese influence in Hong Kong has also been confirmed[10] by Dr.

[10] Dr. Ortmann and I met at a lecture at the Political Science Faculty of National Taiwan University, where during a Q&A session, I specifically asked for his professional opinion on China's ability to undermine foreign societies.

Stephan Ortmann, a German political scientist who has been lecturing at the City University of Hong Kong for almost ten years. Asked about the progressing Chinese political subversion in the special administrative region (SAR), he simply replied: “You can see, feel it, measure it” (Ortmann 2023). Another one of China’s concepts to subvert target societies is via the reinforcement of the narratives surrounding its own benevolent and non-confrontational character as a nation. “China's peaceful rise” policy framework, essentially an influence operation in itself created by the MSS (cf. Joske 2022), is part of this approach. With the help of this framework, Beijing is eager to cultivate its own soft power, aiming to subvert the current global cultural hegemony, which is dominated by the United States. Witnessing Hollywood’s ability to successfully project the American Dream and American way of life around the entire globe for many decades, China has realised that “[c]ultural domination has been an underappreciated facet of [...] global power” (Brzezinski 1997:14). As a result, Beijing has started to acquire networks of mass entertainment in Western countries “to soften the rise of China [...] by introducing appealing parts of Chinese culture through investments and international broadcasting” (Aslan/Yildirim 2020:141). This angle of subversion, which really emphasises the long-term nature of Chinese influence operations, has the ability to plant an almost invisible seed of Beijing’s will into people’s mind – almost uncannily resembling the words of Yuri Bezmenov from 40 years ago.

Last but not least, it cannot be stressed enough that Beijing has the apparent ingenuity to inexhaustible devise a whole plethora of measures for the implementation of subversion with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, only some of the tactics and instruments which are relevant for this thesis are discussed below. In a traditional sense, China still heavily engages in “offline” methods of subversion, as Beijing “make[s] extensive use of in-person networks of human agents of influence” (Charon/Jeangène Vilmer 2021:631). An area, where this practice is most often observable, are the local levels of governance in Taiwan. Here, the UFWD regularly attempts to “bypass the central government (and hence the DPP) in order to go straight at ‘locals’ [and to target] grassroots organizations in fields such as farming, fishing, and tourism” (Chen 2022:149f.). China also commonly uses one of the oldest and simplest tools of subversion: Bribery. For most societies, corruption often “implies the undermining of existing rules of political or moral conduct” (Rhyne 1962:66), and while many Western democracies have installed official control mechanisms in an attempt

to counter this form of influence, other types of governments in other regions of the world are far more susceptible to monetary "gifts" (cf. Doherty/Lyons 2023). However, China has also undertaken far more sophisticated subversive activities, which in a sense directly undermine the sovereignty of affected nations. One particularly well researched example is the widespread establishment of so-called "overseas service stations". Uncovered and highlighted by a human rights NGO based in Spain, Chinese police forces have created an international system for the surveillance, coercion, and forced repatriation of the Chinese diaspora, serving as the long arm of Beijing's will (Safeguard Defenders 2022). Despite also offering legitimate services, such as the assistance of crime victims or integration of new immigrants, the extralegal and semi-secret deployment of personnel with executive powers on foreign soil not only constitutes a violation of international law, but also undermines other nations' monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In addition, and as part of the Russification of Chinese influence operations, Beijing has gradually been perfecting its capabilities in clandestine information warfare in the online domain. Heavily targeting well-established social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, China increasingly utilises "computational propaganda" (Charon/Jeangène Vilmer 2021:623). Particularly the Chinese practice of online astroturfing[11] carries the spirit of subversion. Jovy Chan provides the following definition for this practice:

> Coordinated inauthentic behaviours online are becoming a more serious problem throughout the world. One common type of manipulative behaviour is astroturfing. It happens when an entity artificially creates an impression of widespread support for a product, policy, or concept, when in reality only limited support exists. (2022:507)

This example of online astroturfing as a part of digitalised political warfare underlines the aforementioned arguments that both Sun Tzu's notions of warfare and the Soviet-era character of influence operations have persisted until today, merging into a particular type of subversion with Chinese characteristics. To complete the argument about the omnipresent relevance of subversive influence operations in the mind of the CCP, the next chapter points out the apparent importance of this topic for Beijing via reviewing Chinese codified law.

[11] In the socio-political context, "AstroTurf" refers to a "brand of synthetic carpeting designed to *look like* natural grass, but is in fact *fake* grass (generally used for sports fields)" (Cho/Martens/Kim/Rodrigue 2011:572).

2.2.1 Reinterpreting China's law regarding the subversion of state power

Whereas the previous chapters have defined subversion as a subtle and malicious part of influence operations, and pinpointed organisational structures and practices that support the hypothesis that its practice is indeed Beijing's preferred modus operandi, the following argument serves an important complementary role. The logic of this chapter is the following: A country that has specific laws criminalising the act of subversion, correctly determines that this part of political warfare has the destructive capacity to undermine its government in the long term, and also punishes anyone linked to it in a draconian manner, is probably familiar with this practice beyond an explicable limit. Article 105 of the Criminal Code of the People's Republic of China states the following:

> Among those who organize, plot or carry out the scheme of subverting the State power or overthrowing the socialist system, the ringleaders and the others who commit major crimes shall be sentenced to life imprisonment or fixed-term imprisonment of not less than 10 years [...]. (National People's Congress 1997:73)

This definition implies that Beijing has a very detailed understanding of the concept, and in a precautionary manner has formulated codified laws in order to prevent the subversion of state power. Even though other resourceful countries with vested international interests (e.g. United States, France, Russia) have very similar criminal laws on this subject, China comparatively seems to have ascribed subversion a higher degree of legislative significance. This notion is derived from the fact that in quite a premeditated manner Beijing has "transferred" its own laws on subversion to Hong Kong. The novel Hong Kong national security law, enacted in 2020, not only allows the PRC to crack down on anyone who is *allegedly* colluding with "foreign forces", but includes even more comprehensive paragraphs on how to prosecute subversion (cf. Hong Kong Free Press 2020). This expansion of Chinese anti-subversion law into Hong Kong signalises that Beijing is ready and willing to apply its logic on the topic far from home, and immensely solidifies Smith's statement that "[t]hose who practice it most frequently usually conduct it most effectively" (1989:5). Similarly, China has started to intensify its domestic efforts of countering foreign influence operations. The 2023 update of its anti-espionage law left many foreign individuals and businesses in China worried, as due to its vague formulation it "could give rise to witch hunts, leaving people vulnerable to accusations that lack substantial evidence" (Zhang 2023). In a bid to downplay the situation and reshape the narrative around what are essentially

measures of countering subversion, the Chinese government has started to educate teachers and students domestically on how to identify “foreign infiltration and manipulation, [thus] effectively safeguarding national security” (Yuwei 2023). To extrapolate these insights for the purpose of this thesis, the next chapters outline the most important cornerstones and existing critical research on the BRI, and subsequently present an adequate set of analytical methods to assess potential Chinese influence operations in Vietnam and Pakistan.

3 The Belt and Road Initiative – More than meets the eye?

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global infrastructure development strategy initiated by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in more than 150 countries and to foster international economic cooperation. Predominantly designed to “create strategic propellers for hinterland development” (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2015), Beijing’s proclaimed goal with the BRI is the regional and global construction of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and other critical infrastructure. The initiative is a centrepiece of China’s current foreign policy strategy and as such also envisions educational initiatives, joint research laboratories, and technology transfers with participant countries (ibid.). A significant amount of Western social science researchers – employed at think tanks or policy institutes – has primarily emphasised the potential economic and political benefits of the BRI. It was envisioned that with the help of enhanced connectivity, mutually beneficial infrastructure investments, and improved international relations, the BRI could forge closer ties between Beijing and participant countries (cf. World Bank 2019; cf. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2023).

However, the goal of this thesis is not to discuss this officially promoted narrative of the BRI, promulgated by Beijing and beneficiaries alike. Over the recent years, an increasing number of Western researchers has started to analyse the BRI in a much more critical way, shedding light on controversial aspects of the initiative. Some have pointed out the coercive debt-trap diplomacy employed by Beijing, thus questioning the long-term viability of the initiative (cf. McBride/Berman/Chatzky 2023). Others are worried about the growing civil-military fusion of oversea infrastructure endeavours, attempting to answer the question if “the BRI [is] a vehicle for creating an expanded

Chinese-dominated regional ecosystem that disadvantages the U.S. and likeminded states militarily [...]" (Russel/Berger 2020:8). Charon and Jeangène Vilmer have noted that the BRI – in general – has not lived up to expectations, as many promises about economic prosperity remain unfulfilled to this day, while Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour has also "definitely altered its [benevolent] image" (2021:638f.). These research results about the BRI not performing as "intended" are congruent with Joske's findings, who outlined that the China News Service – controlled by the UFWD – apparently feels the need to provide "[t]raining classes on topics such as 'How to tell the Belt and Road Initiative's story well'" (2020). In order to expand this line of research, this thesis aims to achieve a synthesis of two political science research strands, by combining findings from critical analyses of the BRI with insights about subversion with Chinese characteristics. The final goal is the consolidation of the knowledge that Beijing instrumentalises the initiative as a medium for the implementation of influence operations. However, what are the reasons to believe China is engaged in such a practice and that the underlying hypothesis is valid? Aside from the advantageous aspects of plausible deniability highlighted in Chapter 2 and the growing degree of institutionalisation in the Chinese intelligence community described in Chapter 2.2, the political science research field has amassed an increasing amount of circumstantial evidence to support this exact claim.

This circumstantial evidence is based on two types of indicators, with deductions based on theoretical observations on the one hand, and more "tangible" proof on the other. As Charon and Jeangène Vilmer have outlined, Chinese influence operations of the recent past have granted Beijing some tactical successes but were ultimately a strategic failure (2021:638). Referring to the side effects of the overly assertive and predatory foreign policy behaviour practised under Xi Jinping, the two French researchers conclude that "China remains its own best enemy in terms of influence" (ibid.). Implying that Chinese influence operations were simply too brazen and recognisable as such gives way to the idea, that if Beijing were to learn from its mistakes and resort to more subtle strategies – like long-term subversion of target states – it could be more successful. Others even theorise that the whole idea of the BRI is an influence operation in itself, as it does not actually represent a cohesive or goal-oriented initiative as marketed by Beijing. In a bid to highlight the illusion, Jacob Mardell argues that "[h]aving bought into China's successful mythmaking, the West

has unwittingly helped to keep it alive" (2023). While exploring the parameters of China's economic influence, political scientists Kastner and Pearson agree that the promotion of oversea economic activities plays a key role for the PRC, but stress that it is exceedingly difficult to determine Beijing's true intentions. Albeit admitting that there is an overlap in different Chinese interests, they outline that the BRI strongly serves the purpose of "advancing PRC foreign policy and geostrategic goals" (2021:20f.). This notion of geostrategic interests being woven into the economic corset of the BRI gains even more weight when supported by more tangible research on this matter.

A solid piece of evidence connecting influence operations to the BRI, is the often-overlooked circumstance that the UFWD has a history of being a Chinese outsourcing agent for infrastructure development initiatives. To describe the intricate role of the UFWD within the context of construction projects, the political researcher Jessica Batke refers to an explanation provided by Matt Schrader, an advisor for China at the International Republican Institute:

> This is a core function of the UFWD – collecting the needs of [local] target groups and translating them into policy. One clear throughline for United Front work, from its very early stages in the 1930s, is close attention to the needs of target groups and knowing what the Party can do for them. It's a kind of customer service-oriented mindset. You see the phrase 'fix their problems' over and over again. (2023)

Even though Batke's example is describing a domestic element of UFWD activities, the logic on which the Chinese intelligence and propaganda machinery operates is also applicable abroad. This is because in recent years the CCP has mandated that for China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and many private companies the establishment of internal party cells is required (Doyon 2023). This decree also directly affects companies such as the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) or the China Gezhouba Group Company Limited, which are both heavily invested in oversea BRI infrastructure development projects. In an interview with Dr. Si-Fu Ou (Chinese: 歐錫富), Director of the INDSR division for Chinese Politics, Military, and Warfighting Concepts, the expert revealed two important facts: Firstly, he outlined that it is one of Beijing's common tropes to push the "trade goes first" narrative, while the UFWD's task is to support this story, which is an "old wine in a new bottle". Secondly, he also emphasised that internationally operating Chinese

construction companies are always supervised by a political commissar of the CCP and – even if to a smaller degree than at home – supported by UFWD workers.[12] To supplement the Taiwanese assessment about Chinese influence operations as part of the BRI, it is helpful to add observations made by Western scholars. Another significant piece of circumstantial evidence is the existence of multiple civilian research projects funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), initiated with the sole purpose of uncovering latent mechanics of Chinese influence operations within the BRI. Channelled within the *Minerva Initiative* research program, between the years 2019 and 2023 six different research projects received grants in order to answer questions of how China utilises and exploits psychological biases, how difficult-to-access environments (local communities) are affected by BRI projects, or how the Chinese manipulation of narratives can create believable and coherent stories.[13] To conclude this chapter about the layered and questionable nature of the Belt and Road Initiative, the professional opinion of a geopolitical researcher on this topic can be regarded as one of the guiding rationales of this thesis. During a university lecture, Dr. Martin Riegl stated that "[j]udging from [the] required resources for [the construction of] BRI railways and expected export volumes via these new routes, a purely economic motivation for these infrastructure investments in partner countries is doubtful."[14] Referring to the Chinese "hard" infrastructure investments made in the Central and Southeast Asian parts of the BRI, this statement also highlights one of the key issues discussed in the next chapter: Whereas geopolitical analysts specialised on Africa have already somewhat developed an academic understanding that the BRI is part of a "planetary intelligence" (cf. Pollio 2022) operation, the research on this topic in China's neighbouring countries is still scarce and incomplete. To expand the field of critical BRI research, the next chapter outlines why Vietnam and Pakistan were chosen for the comparative case study and highlights the advantages of a multimethodological approach.

[12] Dr. Si-Fu Ou, personal interview, INDSR headquarters, Taipei, April 25, 2024. His expertise probably constitutes the closest possible research approximation to applied Chinese strategies of subversion, as the political warfare doctrines of the PRC and the ROC (used to) share many similarities (cf. Heinlein 1974).

[13] For further information about these research projects, please refer to: https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Awarded-Projects/Awarded-Projects-Copy/. For the easier navigation through awarded projects, you may use keywords such as "China" + "Belt and Road" + "Influence Operations".

[14] Dr. Martin Riegl, personal communication during the lecture series *Geopolitics and Political Geography of World Regions* (Course Code: JPM142), Charles University, Prague, April 17, 2023.

3.1 Methodologically shedding light on the facts behind the CCP narrative

To correctly assess and locate the most likely areas of Chinese influence operations, it is highly important to first contextualise the gravitational direction of Beijing's geopolitical interests. As discussed in Chapter 2.2, conducting subversive activities requires a large amount of resources, therefore it is safe to assume that even an economic powerhouse like China is targeting only specific opponents in a more concerted fashion. The reasons for limiting the research areas to Vietnam and Pakistan is not only owed to the limits of this thesis but is also guided by the broader context of Chinese geopolitical interests in the region, and the fact that these two countries play a vital role in the successful implementation of the BRI. Some of the more straightforward reasons, why China would be paying special attention to these countries within the context of the BRI, are related to both Vietnam's and Pakistan's economic size, large population, geographical proximity to China, and access to the sea. Furthermore, both nations have arguably profited from Chinese investments, receiving multiple billions of dollars in investments each for infrastructure development (cf. McBride/Berman/Chatzky 2023). However, from Beijing's perspective, these metrics also translate into these nations' geopolitical power (cf. Cohen 2015), which is a dimension China needs to "contain" in order to protect its strategic interests and own BRI assets. To visualise just how important Vietnam and Pakistan are for the BRI, Figure 3 schematically highlights key nodes of Chinese investments and projects along the initiative.

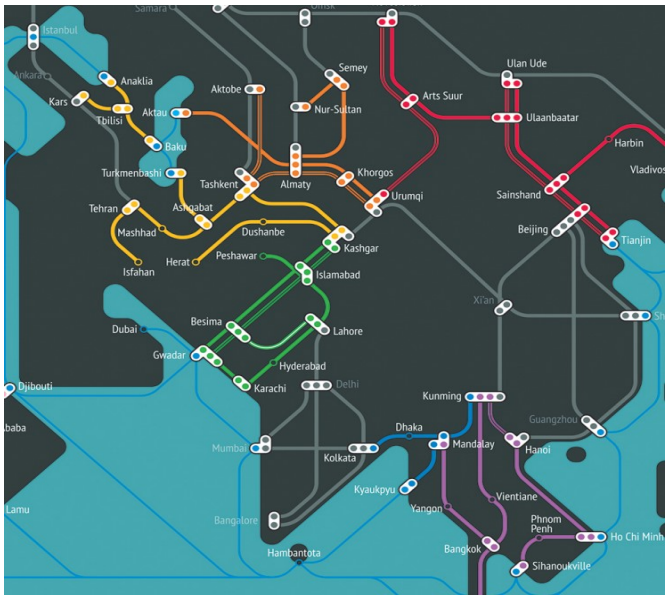

Figure 3 A section from the cover picture of Belt and Road Economics (World Bank 2019)

Nonetheless, there a more than economic factors why these two countries make for an interesting comparative study, as from a (geo)political and cultural perspective they could not be more different. A 2015 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found, that while the Vietnamese public is highly sceptical of China and its leadership, Pakistanis have an exceptionally favourable opinion of China (Stokes 2015), whereas these results come as no surprise considering the historical relationships between these countries. These findings support the assumption that China needs to be adaptive about the ways and means of influence operations in these countries, as the local populations are likely to be susceptible to different kinds of subversive stimuli. Finally, choosing Vietnam and Pakistan as research areas of Chinese subversion makes perfect sense, as Charon and Jeangène Vilmer have already validated that both Moscow and Beijing like to use their "near abroad as a testing ground before launching [influence] operations worldwide" (2021:626).

In order to approximate the existence of Chinese influence operations in Vietnam and Pakistan as best as possible, a two-pronged approach of data acquisition has been deemed most useful for this thesis, as reliable information about subversion or influence operations are hard to find due to their sensitive nature impacting the national security of states. Primary data has been acquired via a series of expert interviews and consultations, conducted with university personnel, a policy researcher from a think-tank, and an actual contemporary witness of Soviet-era subversion methods.[15] The primary data providers can generally be distinguished into two categories, one representing institutional viewpoints and the other expressing individual insights. However, both data categories are valuable in their own regard, as they are complementary and have added further nuances to the concept of subversion with Chinese characteristics. To embed the primary data implications into an existing layer of political science research results, a set of secondary data is added. Secondary data includes sources like foreign policy papers, government statements, as well as policy and intelligence analyses from think tanks (cf. Grossman 2022; cf.

[15] Originally, it was also intended to conduct interviews with government officials and multiple researchers from different organisations with special knowledge about the BRI or Chinese influence operations. However, out of more than 30 contacted institutions and individuals, only a handful responded. Multiple Taiwanese ministries declined my interview requests, an official from the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs outright stated that my questions are "too sensitive" to discuss, and unfortunately I never received an answer from the contacted Pakistani policy research institutes.

Mushtaq/Shad 2022). Both primary and secondary data are compiled and structured according to their topical relevance and in a way which serves to answer the research questions handled in this thesis. A comparative case study methodology like this can be employed as a "broad umbrella research strategy [used] to understand a complex [geopolitical] phenomenon" (Kodithuwakku 2022:181). Critical case or comparative case studies have been regularly used as research designs in military, security, or (geo)political science (Biddle 2004; Botea/Taylor 2008), thus qualifying the approach chosen in this case as a valid procedure, operating within well-established academic boundaries.

Within the two respective case studies, a "multi-method" (Christenson/Gerring 2017:210) technique is most likely to achieve the intended triangulation, which also improves the reliability of findings. The case study cornerstones are first discussed with the help of a basic policy analysis rationale, which later also serves as a guideline and interpretative framework for the information extracted from both primary and secondary sources. Highlighting the universal applicability of a *rational model*, Patton, Sawicki, and Clark argue that this approach to policy analyses can be "highly useful for [...] the first cut at a longer-term project." (2016:4). To lay the argumentative direction of the case study, only step one of this model – as depicted in Figure 4 – is used for this thesis, which is the definition of a (policy) problem.

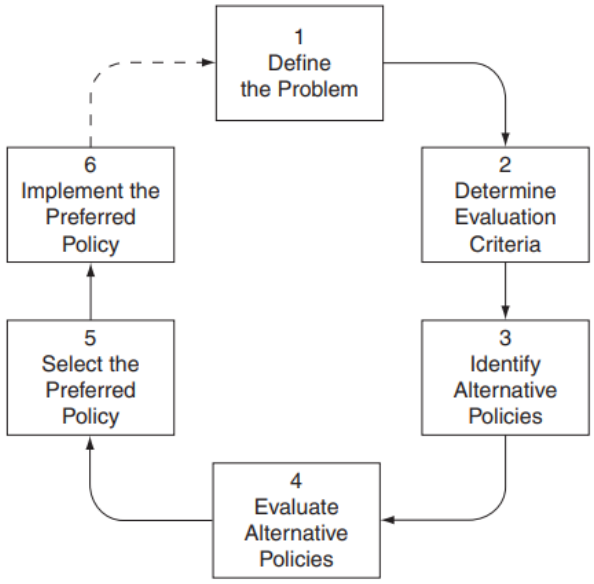

Figure 4 The Classical Rationale Problem-Solving Process (ibid.)

Even though there are no official subversive policies per se to be analysed (see Chapter 2.2), the model's rationale is still helpful to gauge which problems probably need to be considered by the CCP for the implementation of influence operations abroad. As outlined in the previous chapter, Chinese influence, which is exerted too overtly, causes considerable political headwind for Beijing. Therefore, through the lens of political warfare, the deeper contextualisation of official policies regulating the international relations of China can provide "informative signals of [Beijing's true] intentions" (Yarhi-Milo 2014:3). The logic here is that China can utilise less suspicious official policies as a "cover" to divert public attention from the actual subversive activities. Combining these observations with the information highlighted in Chapter 2.2 about the expansion and growing institutionalisation of China's intelligence apparatus, the intentionality behind Beijing's subversive influence operations appears even more concrete. To extract more nuances from the primary sources, in the next step a second methodological tool is applied, which is a so-called *fine structure analysis* (German: Feinstrukturanalyse). Given the secretive nature of matters related to subversion or influence operations, the basic assumption here is that interview partners are unable or not allowed to share their insights in too much detail, hence an interpretation via a fine structure analysis is expected to contextualise not explicitly mentioned information. This method of analysing qualitative interviews has been proposed for the closer inspection of sensitive or latent meanings (Froschauer/Lueger 2020:111), making it specifically useful for the illumination of more intricate aspects. Figure 5 shows the original version of the *evaluation chart* (German: Auswertungsschema) used for this analytical method, which will be slightly modified in function for the purposes of this thesis.

Para-phrase	Intentionen / Funktionen	latente Bedeutungen	Rollenver-teilung	Anschlußoptionen / Prüfung

Figure 5 Evaluation chart for the fine structure analysis, as proposed by Froschauer and Lueger (2020:119)

Originally, the fine structure analysis has been proposed as an exploratory and analytical method for interviews, aiming to highlight the social dynamics between the participants and working along qualitative principles (ibid.:7f.). However, this method can also be applied for the extended evaluation of the information emitted by an interviewee, while also considering their respective socio-political role in a given context. Within the context of this thesis, the author was the inquiring party, trying to gain insights into the experts' special knowledge about the BRI or Chinese influence operations. At this point it needs to be emphasised, that the interview sections analysed in the subchapters of the case studies were specifically chosen because of their significance, "richness" in context, and ability to create momentum for the arguments made in this work. To individually contextualise the multiple layers of these meaningful passages, Froschauer and Lueger recommend a division into *units of analysis* (ibid.:114), with each unit representing a column in Figure 5. From left to right, the first column encapsulates the so-called **paraphrase**, which essentially represents the primary layer of information communicated by the interviewee (ibid.:115). The second column's function is to gauge the **function** of the transmitted piece of information. Why was this information emitted, and what was the emitting party's **intention**? In this step of the analysis, the authors explicitly encourage theorising and assumptions – within a reasonable scope – to explore the subjective subtext below the objective surface layer of communication (ibid.). The third column allows for the interpretation of **latent meanings**, which is important to increase the range of alternative explanations and also represents the main focus point of the fine structure analysis. Special focus is to be put on fine nuances, such as the use of specific phrases or references (ibid.:116f.). These alternative explanations are supported by additional contextual information added from the pool of secondary sources. The next unit of analysis questions the **distribution of roles** in the communicative process. Taking into account their potential individual or institutional biases, what roles do my interview partners ascribe to China or the case study countries within the context of this research project (ibid.:117f.)? In this case, the final unit of the analytical process is the preliminary examination of **follow-up options.** What implications can be derived from the previous units of analysis (ibid.:118) and how could these insights be channelled into future geopolitical research on the topics of this thesis? To prove the hypotheses of this thesis, the analysed sequences within the case studies were selected in a way that supports the lines of argumentation

(ibid.:139) exercised in the literature review chapters, while adding more tangible clues about presumable Chinese subversion in Vietnam and Pakistan.

Finally, it is important to highlight some of the research deficiencies of this thesis and the eventuality of biases within the data. As both Chinese subversion and influence operations are highly sensitive topics, relevant secondary data is scarce, potential experts – that are also willing to share their insights – are hard to find, and the resources for this research project were limited, the contributions made by this thesis only represent an initial step towards the deeper understanding of subversive BRI mechanics. The difficulties of doing civilian and academic research on issues related to national security are further supported by the assessment that "[t]he complexity of an intelligence problem determines to a great extent the certainty that can be provided by intelligence and security services" (Menkveld 2021:621). Consequently, the general aim of this thesis is to enrich the field of geopolitical research with additional circumstantial evidence and insights about Chinese influence operations, conducted in regions that are relatively underresearched in this regard. From a data bias perspective, it has to be mentioned, that unfortunately there is no way to guarantee the complete objectivity of some sources. Within the context of great power competition, it can be assumed that American and Taiwanese secondary or primary sources are united in their "anti-China" bias to some degree, whereas Pakistani sources can be deemed as quite "pro-China", given the "all-weather" relationship between Islamabad and Beijing. Nonetheless, these biases are accounted for appropriately and balanced out accordingly within the case studies.

4 Case Study: Vietnam

The goal of this chapter is to contextualise and briefly discuss the type and nature of China-Vietnam relations, including some important historical and geopolitical events from the past and more recent dynamics in the relationship since the inauguration of the BRI in 2013.

From a historical perspective, it can be stated, that the relationship between China and Vietnam is in fact strained. In the eyes of China, the northern parts of Vietnam used to be part of their empire during the times of the Han dynasty, something that is also

taught this way to Chinese youths. On the other hand, Vietnamese people prefer the viewpoint, that the Chinese influence in Indochina was marked by a colonial character going hand in hand with subjugative and assimilatory policies (cf. Nguyen 2023). Later on, the Sino-Vietnamese tensions reached new heights in the years following the Vietnam War, as the Cold War has pushed the two countries into opposing alliances. On February 17, 1979, Chinese PLA troops crossed the Vietnamese border, and the ensuing open conflict with heavy casualties on both sides definitively cemented Hanoi's deep distrust in Beijing (cf. Womack 2006).

How has this historical prelude affected the mutual geopolitical and geostrategic superstructure between the two neighbours? From the perspective of international foreign policy experts, "economic and geopolitical realities prevent Vietnam from aligning against China or collaborating with the U.S. to any significant extent." (Grossman/Orner 2021:104). They assess, that due to the tense relationship, a closer China-Vietnam security cooperation is unlikely in the near future. Therefore, in the wake of China's nine-dash-line claim in the SCS, Beijing needs to recognise and respect "Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and territorial claims" (ibid.). These analyses regarding Vietnam's pivotal role within Chinese considerations in the SCS gain even more significance when coupled with Hanoi's geostrategic position in the region. As highlighted by military researchers, China has to carefully consider Vietnam's ability to develop effective anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the SCS, something which could put Beijing at a significant disadvantage in a hypothetical first island chain confrontation with the United States (cf. Lake 2023). It can be argued, that in an effort to steer against such an unfavourable development, China has begun to amplify its ideological relationship with Vietnam. With the presumable goal of restraining Vietnam's short to mid-term geopolitical scope of action, Beijing and Hanoi have recently issued a joint statement about their interest to create a "community of shared future for humankind" (Guarascio/Vu/Nguyen 2023). Despite often being used as a "blank" political slogan by the CCP, the question has already been raised if this could be seen as a subliminal Chinese hegemonic claim over the now sovereign Vietnam. This possibility would in turn further solidify the notion about the contemporary rejuvenation of China's Tianxia ambitions (cf. Tsang/Cheung 2023), an aspect of Chinese policy-making that has already been discussed in Chapter 1.3.

On the other hand, Vietnam is fully aware of its asymmetrical power relation to China, a dynamic that is actively considered within the context of Hanoi's national security. This is not surprising, as "Vietnam possesses no security alliance with any great power or alliance network, which is exactly what [makes it] susceptible." (Grossman 2022). To counterbalance this military and strategic weakness, Hanoi has begun reaching out to regional powers in terms of security and defence cooperation. These efforts have resulted in a rapprochement between Vietnam and India, a development that highly displeases Delhi's geopolitical rival Beijing. Not only has Hanoi now signed an arms deal with Delhi, but there is "ongoing speculation that Vietnam may soon purchase India's BrahMos [supersonic] cruise missile" (Grossman 2023), which would exactly lead to the manifestation of China's aforementioned A2/AD nightmare in the SCS. In light of these underlying Sino-Vietnamese tensions, Hanoi is also carefully observing how the BRI affects the security architecture on the Indochinese Peninsula. Vietnam seems particularly concerned about the fact, that Chinese BRI projects in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia have the *calculated* long-term potential to undermine Vietnamese energy, water and food security (Nguyễn/Nguyễn/Nguyễn 2023). These geopolitical and geoeconomic implications, coupled with Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour in the SCS, have led to the general situation that "unlike some other Southeast Asian peers, [Hanoi] remains rather hesitant" (Hiep 2019:75) regarding the implementation of BRI projects. This hesitancy has contributed to the current ambiguous geopolitical situation, in which Hanoi has agreed to some joint BRI projects in Vietnam but has increased its balancing efforts via additional military procurements. Though difficult to interpret, Vietnam's political behaviour indicates a "hedging strategy which is a flexible combination of both bandwagoning and balancing strategies" (Vu/Soong/Nguyen 2020:56).

From a policy analysis perspective and as a transition to the next chapter, the complex situation between Vietnam and China forces Beijing to consider the following problems within its mission to implement subversive mechanics into the BRI framework: How to perpetuate Hanoi's more "predictable" hedging strategy, while subtly influencing Vietnam's geopolitical trajectory? How to circumvent the deeply rooted scepticism towards Beijing and create pro-China "anchors" in a highly vigilant society?

4.1 The targeting of researchers and scholars

In this analytical example, various interview sequences with a Vietnamese lecturer of international relations and political science from Hanoi University are examined. When asked about the general Vietnamese perception of the BRI, Ta Thi Oanh confirmed that the initiative is not very popular in her home country and that in her opinion China's motivations behind the BRI are indeed somewhat questionable. According to her, China has adapted its approach of promoting cooperation, while the Fudan University in Shanghai has become known in the region for proactively offering scholarships for the academic study of BRI-related issues. Additionally, in recent years Beijing has begun trying to influence the perceptions of scholars, instead of wanting to convince the government in Hanoi of the BRI's advantages. She underlines her hypothesis with the observation, that after her colleagues have returned from BRI workshops held in Shanghai, they were less sceptical and generally more favourable of the initiative.[16]

Paraphrase	**Intention/Function**	**Latent Meanings**	**Distribution of Roles**	**Follow-up options**
China is trying new strategies on how to be "closer" to other nations. The Fudan University plays an important role in the promotion of the BRI. China wants to influence Vietnamese scholars, and not the government. BRI workshops have an effect on researchers' perception of the initiative.	Chinese influence is fluid in its nature and should not only be studied via well-established research prisms. From the Vietnamese perspective, the Fudan University's BRI promotion capacity is more "influential" than the central powers in Beijing. China is trying to target scholars; a more subliminal approach with less public attention. China is "luring" international BRI researchers to events and can successfully manipulate their perceptions.	Within the context of the BRI, China is currently in a phase of international policy experimentation (a familiar concept in domestic Chinese politics), gauging what strategies could be most effective for the initiative's long-term success. Critical BRI researchers should pay closer attention to the manipulative power of BRI-associated institutions with high credibility. Within the context of BRI influence operations, knowledgeable researchers have become a vulnerable interest group for Beijing. Maybe scholars should refrain from participating in BRI promotion events, if they want to maintain their professional objectivity.	Vietnam as a "testing ground" for different or new approaches of BRI influence operations. The targeted Vietnamese research community, as a cautionary example of what could also happen to other BRI member countries. China as an intruding power, which is slowly eroding critical voices within Vietnam's academic base.	Within the context of critical BRI research, a broader understanding is required of how exactly China can influence developing countries. Policymakers in BRI member countries are advised to account for the susceptibility of their academic community. For the development of more "protective" policies, a better understanding of the internal dynamics of BRI promotion events is required.

[16] Ms. Ta Thi Oanh, personal interview, online (Taipei-Hanoi), May 11, 2024.

The implications of this analysis partially interlock with key arguments already made in Chapter 2.2, particularly the notion about the UFWD presence at BRI promotion events. Especially the circumstance that China is trying to influence the perception of Vietnamese scholars and researchers in a particular way, is a key sign of a subversive momentum behind the narrative of international BRI promotion. Another indicator, that China – to some extent – is already exercising its ability to subliminally influence the Vietnamese educational elite, has been provided by Ms. Oanh in a later part of the interview: When asked about how the Vietnamese perception of China has changed in the last decade, she noticed that in recent years more young people in Vietnam want to study the Chinese language, and that the Chinese Faculty at Hanoi University has significantly increased its courses (ibid.). Via a deeper contextualisation, these findings gain even more significance. The Fudan University in Shanghai is not officially part of the University Alliance of the Silk Road (cf. UASR 2024). The UASR is the academic arm of the BRI and was founded to facilitate academic mobility, research cooperation, and student exchanges (cf. China Daily 2016). Therefore, it is plausible that the continued observation and study of the Fudan University in the context of BRI promotion in Southeast Asia could help to conceptualise its exact role and influential power.

Furthermore, these insights about the apparent Chinese impact on the Vietnamese academia are somewhat surprising. According to the *China Index* initiative, a Taiwanese civil society organization (CSO) researching the malign influence of digital authoritarianism, their data for 2021 only indicates a minimal Chinese influence on Vietnam's scholarly class, simply stating that the Hanoi University's Confucius Institute (CI) has received financial support from the PRC (China Index 2022a). However, the subversive role of Hanoi's CI is discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter. Finally, to embed these findings into existent research of China's influence on research and science, it can be helpful to emphasise that communist regimes have a history of coopting even the highest echelons of (international) academia, whereas these covert dynamics are often revealed only decades later (cf. Ghosh 2021). Within the European context, the "risks of scientific collaboration with China" (Karásková/Šebok/Blablová 2022:5) have already been analysed, while these authors emphasise that their findings on how to develop trusted research capabilities vis-à-vis China are also applicable elsewhere (ibid.).

4.2 The “communist brother” narrative

To complement the Vietnamese inside perspective of Chinese subversive influence, the second analytical example of this case study utilises another set of statements from the interview conducted with Dr. Si-Fu Ou. Despite his detailed knowledge of Chinese political warfare, he explained that he is not familiar with any specific influence operations Beijing could be conducting in Vietnam. However, is his professional opinion, China has two active levers it could exploit for subversive activities: One possibility is the reinforced Chinese emphasis of communism as a nexus between the two nations. The other is that this ideological proximity could in turn be instrumentalised as a narrative line against “foreign interventions”, as Beijing and Hanoi already maintain an exclusive *comprehensive strategic partnership*.[17]

Paraphrase	**Intention/Function**	**Latent Meanings**	**Distribution of Roles**	**Follow-up options**
The communist narrative plays an important role in the relationship of Vietnam and China. China wants to convey the idea that it is concerned about “foreign intervention”. The bilateral relationship between Beijing and Hanoi has a special and elevated status.	The versatility in which ways Beijing can bend the communist narrative to its own advantage should not be underestimated by the international community. China could want to promote and advance an “us versus them” mentality in Vietnam. The special relationship could be used by China to instil a false sense of security in Vietnam – very much in the spirit of “A known enemy is better than an unknown friend”.	Despite mutual distrust and high tensions due to Chinese aggressions in the SCS, Beijing still finds the ways and means of shaping its geopolitical environment non-militarily. Within the greater context of the BRI, Beijing could try to influence Vietnam’s geopolitical trajectory in a more favourable way. This narrative experimentation could be interpreted as a wedge tactic, aiming to prevent too much proximity between Hanoi and Washington. If successful, Beijing’s threat reframing could potentially turn the comprehensive strategic partnership into Vietnam’s Achilles heel.	Beijing as the promoting agent of communist ideology, which is a safe haven against unwanted outside change. Due to its hedging strategy, Vietnam is in a difficult position. Following Beijing on a “reinforced” communist path, Hanoi potentially sacrifices its long-term geopolitical scope of action for middle-term security.	Develop a more contemporary understanding of how China uses communist ideology and narratives in its relationship with Vietnam. Observe and evaluate what policies can support Vietnam’s sovereign course of action, so that Hanoi has the ability to counterbalance potential (subversive) downsides of its comprehensive strategic partnership with China.

The analysis of these interview sequences indicates that the manipulation of narratives by China – in the context of influence operations – plays an important role, and that Beijing has the ability to weave this strategy into all kinds of different contexts. As part of the *Minerva Initiative* research program (highlighted in Chapter 3), the security

[17] Dr. Si-Fu Ou, personal interview, INDSR headquarters, Taipei, April 25, 2024.

expert Scott Ruston from the Arizona State University has been researching the risks of Chinese manipulated narratives in the Indo-Pacific region. Explaining that disinformation and propaganda heavily rely on narrative as a tool to create coherent and believable stories, he provides the following preliminary assessment of this Chinese strategy:

> As such, narrative is a vehicle for appealing to values and creating emotional reactions that motivate action. Moreover, it is efficient because of vertical integration, where cultural-level strategic narratives are widely known and accepted by members of a target audience. (Ruston 2019)

This notion of “vertical integration” is particularly relevant, as it allows the party initiating the subversion to seamlessly embed elements of its own strategic interest into “inconspicuous” (foreign) domains. To outline how China probably utilises the subversive power of narratives, the following pieces of circumstantial evidence indicate a two-pronged strategy of Chinese influence in Vietnam. As explained in the methodology section, the contextualisation of official policy regulations between Beijing and Hanoi can provide clues about China’s actual intentions. The first clue of a very latent form of Chinese subversion can be found in the communicational output of the CI in Hanoi. Scrolling down its Facebook page, on April 16, 2024, the institute has made a posting, informing online visitors about working hours around the time of the Hùng Kings' Temple Festival (Vietnamese: Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương). Figure 6 below shows this informational posting.

Figure 6 Posting on the Facebook page of the Confucius Institute at Hanoi University, April 16, 2024. (Viện Khổng Tử Hanu 2024)

Of particular interest for this thesis is the lower right corner of Figure 6, depicting a group of armed soldiers. There is no doubt about the type and nature of this graphical element, as it bears the typical mark of communist symbolism. However, only via a deeper inspection of this piece of information does it gain the necessary relevance to be regarded as an act of Chinese subversion. The Hùng Kings' Temple Festival, one of the most important Vietnamese national holidays, is celebrated to remember and cherish the traditional founders and first kings of the Vietnamese nation. It is a purely cultural event rooted in historical folklore and has absolutely no relations to contemporary politics in Vietnam, let alone communism.[18] This raises the question, why Hanoi's CI felt compelled to intermix communist symbolism with an unrelated event. Was it just carelessness or a conscious act of Chinese narrative manipulation to subconsciously reinforce communism as an agglutinating force between the two countries? Following the factual base provided by Charon and Jeangène Vilmer about the true nature of CI's, this example can be seen as a strong indicator of Chinese subversion, as the Institutes are known to have close ties to the UFWD, the ability to distort the perceptions of a nation's think tank landscape, while having "leverage over the host institutions" (2021:301f.). Combining this finding with Ta Thi Oanh's statement from the previous chapter, that more and more Vietnamese youths want to study Chinese, should be a warning sign to Hanoi that their CI might be playing a "larger role in strengthening cultural exchanges [than intended]" (China Daily 2020).

The second clue, greatly supporting Dr. Ou's ideas on how China could implement influence operations in Vietnam, can be found when observing how the communist "aspect" of the relationship between Beijing and Hanoi has developed since Xi Jinping took power. If China's current efforts, to strengthen its ties to the "communist brother", were indeed guided by a long-term subversive rationale, it first had to overcome multiple low points in the relationship from the recent past. In 1988, the Johnson South Reef skirmish resulted in 64 Vietnamese casualties, whereas the commemoration of this event still has the gravity to cause protests in Hanoi decades later (Reuters 2016). Even more detrimental for any potential Chinese plans to silently undermine Vietnam, the 2014 oil rig crisis in the SCS has led to unprecedented anti-China riots in Vietnam,

[18] I specifically reached out to my Vietnamese fellow students in Taipei regarding the scope of this festival, and they quite emphatically told me that the Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương is a "cultural or religious event".

while Hanoi tactfully used the opportunity to channel these tensions to strengthen pro-government nationalism (cf. Bui 2017). Circling back to the initial policy analysis aspect of this case study, how could Beijing circumvent this unprecedented amount of Vietnamese vigilance, while avoiding that bilateral tensions lead to an unfavourable degree of geopolitical approximation between Hanoi and Washington? In retrospect, Xi's official call for the advancement of China-Vietnam ties (Xinhua 2017) could have been the beginning of an elaborate influence operations to "artificially" create a common communist narrative between China and Vietnam. Chinese subversive activities could have the goal to steer the communist trajectories of both countries closer together, as both countries might be operating along the Marxist-Leninist ideology, but the communist parties "of China and Vietnam [in fact] do not get on" (The Economist 2017).

In light of this, the comprehensive strategic partnership or the bilateral agreement of "building a community with a shared future", can be interpreted as Chinese efforts to reinforce the communist "brotherhood", while keeping non-communist international partners at an arm's length. In this case, "an arm's length" is not a figure of speech, but can be taken literally, as seen in Figure 7.

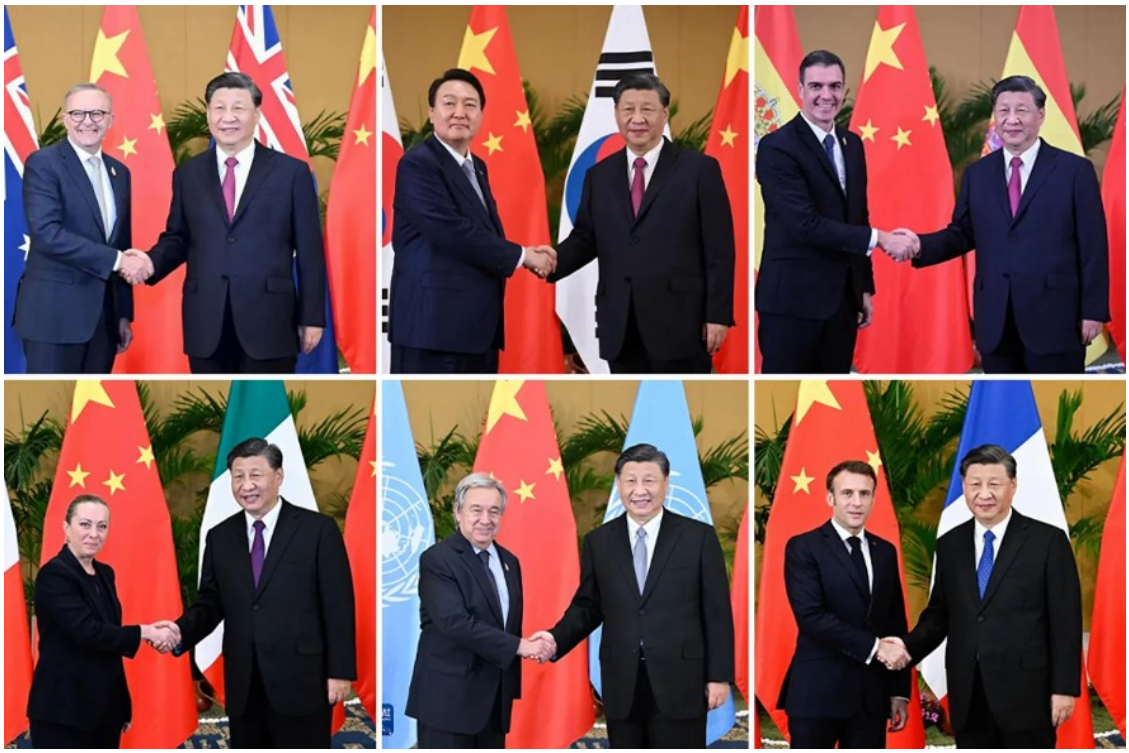

Figure 7 President Xi Jinping meets with world leaders at the G20 (Bagshaw 2022)

Figure 7 shows Xi Jinping meeting with powerful world leaders at the 2022 G20 summit at Bali. In a rather typical manner, the body language between China's most powerful man and western heads of state signalises a formal distance, while also indicating the underlying asymmetry of power. But what does a formal meeting between communist neighbours China and Vietnam look like? The stark contrast, both in body language and strategic signalling, is visible in Figure 8.

Figure 8 Xi Jinping with the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Nguyễn Phú Trọng in Hanoi, Vietnam, December 12, 2023 (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2023)

Juxtaposed, the difference between Figure 7 and 8 sends the strong message to the outside world, that the relationship between China and Vietnam is of a special and exclusive nature. As state visits between communist regimes are highly orchestrated events planned to the minute, the imagery of this meeting is not coincidental. As highlighted in the left picture, it is possible that in an act of feigned humility, Xi allows Nguyễn Phú Trọng to engage in a dominant handshake, a type of "vulnerability" that is virtually never to be seen in meetings with other state leaders. The right picture shows the two statesmen holding hands in a more "intimate" way. Albeit not an exaggerated gesture such as the socialist fraternal kiss, this aspect of Chinese-Vietnamese protocol could be interpreted as an indicator of Chinese diplomatic subversion leading towards the aspired "brotherly proximity" (cf. Radchenko 2014:166). Combining the insights from the fine structure analysis with these two pieces of circumstantial evidence, strongly supports the idea that China pursues a two-pronged subversive strategy in Vietnam, targeting the cultural base and political establishment simultaneously. From a long-term perspective, these multi-layered efforts have the potential to disrupt Vietnam's geopolitical powers, by distorting the internal communist governmental cohesion and the autonomous ideological leadership (cf. Cohen 2015:2) of the CPV.

5 Case Study: Pakistan

Similarly to the previous case study, it is first important to outline the most important hallmarks of China-Pakistan relations. In a very contrasting fashion to Vietnam, historical and geopolitical dynamics between Beijing and Islamabad have led to the current situation, which is marked by the permeation of Chinese influence into almost all aspects of Pakistani society and government.

Following the tumultuous years of the Chinese Civil War, Pakistan was one of the first countries to establish official diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China in 1950. In the following years – despite initially being ambivalent towards the newly proclaimed communist regime at its border – the relationship grew closer, as both sides were united by their mutual mistrust of India. This not only resulted in the signature of the China-Pakistan friendship treaty of 1956, but also in the important 1963 agreement regarding border disputes in the contested Kashmir region (cf. Afridi/Bajoria 2010). Despite these initial steps of rapprochement, mutual national prioritisation in its modern form only really took off in the mid-2000s, due to the “shift in U.S.-India relations and China's own global ambitions [that] made Pakistan a critical partner for China” (Miller 2022). This novel proximity between the two nations – often dubbed as “all-weather diplomatic relations” – has led to extensive Chinese arms exports to Pakistan and continued support for its nuclear weapons program (ibid.). Ultimately, the relationship has become paramount for China the moment the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was initiated in 2015. The CPEC is a centrepiece of the BRI, as China has invested enormous amounts of money into infrastructure development in Pakistan, reaching $65 billion as of 2022 (Shahzad 2022).

This amount of aid can not purely be explained by the preferred Chinese narrative of economic benevolence and development but is undoubtedly driven by Beijing’s ulterior geopolitical and geostrategic motivations in the region. The indicators for this argument are manifold: As China has realised, that for modern global power projection the ability to project sea power far beyond its own coasts is quintessential, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone massive efforts of modernisation. Aiming to protect its growing oversea interest, such as BRI projects or the associated

Maritime Silk Road, the PLAN has devised a concept of "Far Seas Protection"[19]. As one security researcher explains, this naval buildup is clearly guided by Chinese strategic thinking, because "[w]hile the PRC's current global deployments are cast firmly in a defensive setting, there is no good reason to assume that this will continue" (Salisbury 2024:12). As it is further discussed in the second analytical example of this case study, Pakistan plays a key role in the long-term realisation of China's oversea maritime expansion plans, as direct or indirect control of Pakistan's land area would allow Beijing to circumvent Delhi's power projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in case of actual conflict. China's potential motivation to use the CPEC as part of a hedging "contingency plan" in the IOR to reduce the pivotal role of the Malacca strait, has already been examined by Garlick, who referred to this Chinese strategy as "geo-positional balancing" (2018:519). The significance of Pakistan's Gwadar port – financed and built by China – is elevated even further, as analysts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies have pointed out that within the broader strategic plans of China in the IOR, the development of military and logistical installations in the Middle East have a high priority for Beijing (cf. Funaiole/Hart/McElwee 2023). To ensure, that Pakistan remains in this currently very favourable geopolitical position for China, Beijing can make extended use of the high levels of corruption in Pakistan. As outlined in Chapter 2.2, China uses bribery as part of its subversive operations abroad, and since virtually all levels of society and governance in Pakistan show high markers of corruptibility (Rose-Ackerman 1997:4ff.), it would make sense for Beijing to exploit this endemic Pakistani weak point. These untransparent and unreliable Pakistani governance structures allow China to implement CPEC projects with barely existent regulatory oversight, as official reports have uncovered that embezzlement and corruption within these projects are frequent (Wani 2020). To conclude, China's geopolitical reasoning in Pakistan is driven by a premeditated and realist thought process, regularly operating along the principles of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this geopolitical school of thought can be utilised to capture certain dynamics in the Chinese (foreign) policy-making process. This inference is drawn via closer inspection of Andrew Small's book, *The China–Pakistan Axis*. After an extensive period of fieldwork in Pakistan – winning

[19] The Chinese concept of "Far Seas Protection" basically refers to the country's ability to develop a blue-water navy, which in naval terminology stands for a maritime force with the ability to operate worldwide, primarily in the vast expanses of the open seas (cf. Royal Navy 2004).

the trust of government and military officials – the author describes that Beijing's strategy in Pakistan is guided by the ideas of "Wang Jisi, one of China's leading foreign policy intellectuals, who advance[s] the case for China 'marching West' as the US pivots to the East" (Small 2015:163). Essentially capturing the spirit of a Mackinderian "New Great Game"[20] in Asia, this Chinese worldview highlights that the Xi administration is not only familiar with the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical terminology but believes "that a rising power of China's stature should be able to advance east and west, walk and chew gum at the same time" (ibid.:164).

Pakistan, on the other hand, has seemingly accepted its role in this geopolitically very asymmetrical relationship. Domestically, post-colonial Pakistan has been in a constant state of governmental fragility, struggling with ethnic, cultural, racial and religious division, and unable to achieve a national identity since the detachment from British colonial rule (Hilali 2002:65f.). These multidimensional shortcomings in Pakistan have created an unstable state with the typically counterintuitive character of simultaneously strong authoritarian but weak infrastructural power (cf. Mann 1986). As a result, a hierarchical and strongly militarised regime defined by excessive praetorianism has emerged in Islamabad. In her book *Military Inc.*, Pakistani political scientist Ayesha Siddiqa describes, that a few high-ranking military corps commanders basically steer the majority of governmental decisions in Pakistan, and that via the Fauji Foundation – a multi-sectoral conglomerate entity – they run their own parallel economic system within the country (Siddiqa 2007). These opaque, unelected, and non-democratic networks of power are fertile soil for Beijing's intended exertion of influence, as Pakistan's military-centred government is highly dependent on the influx of Chinese arms and capital. Capitalising on this favourable geopolitical and geostrategic environment, Chinese BRI projects in Pakistan are especially prone to high levels of civil-military fusion (cf. Russel/Berger 2020). With the presumed intention of balancing some of its structural deficits, Islamabad's enthusiastic participation in the CPEC could have been driven by the hope, that this part of the BRI would "bring Pakistan's economy from an agricultural structure into an industrial structure" (The Express Tribune 2022). However, in hindsight it has become clear that the auspicious Chinese

[20] The Great Game refers to the rivalry between the 19th-century British and Russian colonial empires, which used military and diplomatic interventions to gain influence in Central and South Asia.

narrative of economic development in Pakistan is often just that: A narrative. A report of a small independent farming NGO reveals the sobering facts:

> There are few indications that CPEC agriculture projects are being carried out. China is dragging its feet to get things rolling, with little infrastructure work happening. The promises to boost Pakistani farmers out of poverty by linking them to international markets seem to have vanished into thin air. (GRAIN 2021)

This stark contrast between the promoted Chinese storyboard and the realities on the ground can be explained by the circumstance that “the Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, aggressively stamping out criticism [...] at all costs” (Afzal 2020). In light of this and as a concluding remark, it is not an exaggeration to state that – aside from the constant animosities between Pakistan and India (for a multitude of reasons) – a significant part of Islamabad’s external geopolitical scope of action is defined by its relationship to Beijing. Considering this favourable yet nuanced relationship between Pakistan and China, the initial policy analysis highlights that Beijing faces the following problems in its mission of using BRI or CPEC projects for the implementation of influence operations: How to preserve the geopolitical proximity to Pakistan, while keeping its national security related analytical capabilities at bay? How to keep alive the convenient CPEC narrative, and thus providing security for already existing BRI assets in Pakistan?

5.1 Agents of influence or useful idiots?

The aim of this analytical example is to provide an insight into Pakistan’s own assessments regarding potential risks emanated by the CPEC and China in general. As no local experts were available for interviews, the analysis will utilise a representative mix of Pakistani viewpoints on this matter, sourced from various think tanks and policy researchers. Upon closer inspection, the vast majority of Pakistan’s BRI-related and publicly available security evaluations are seemingly united by a common denominator: Except for geoeconomic considerations about the potential Chinese “debt trap diplomacy”, there is a near complete lack of critical assessments regarding China itself as a potential geopolitical or geostrategic risk factor for Pakistan. This is insofar quite surprising, as the CPEC includes numerous sensitive infrastructure projects (ports, power grids, information and communications technology nodes), which are usually considered as national security priorities.

However, most of the Pakistani analyses follow these three argumentative lines, while excluding other important viewpoints: 1) They reframe the issue of latent BRI security risks and divert attention to challenges caused by other international development projects in the region. For example, in its *Margalla Papers* series, a biannual publication of Pakistan's National Defence University (NDU), the institute compares the BRI to the US-led initiative called Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) and emphasises that the Western approach can only "benefit Middle Eastern countries if it aligns with BRI" (Siddiqa/Abbas 2022:1). 2) Another angle is the thorough discussion of the CPEC's impact on Pakistan's regional security matrix, while highlighting the role of neighbouring countries. From the perspective of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), the geopolitical risks from Afghanistan, Iran, and India are all noteworthy (Mushtaq/Shad 2022), but the deep Chinese involvement in Pakistan's national security via the CPEC is apparently not an issue. 3) The final Pakistani argumentative avenue against criticism of the CPEC is to blatantly dismiss concerns. In a highly questionable essay published in *The Chinese Economy* journal, a group of Pakistani researchers attempts to "debunk" criticism of the CPEC, calling concerned critics "hecklers" who propagate "myths" and spread "pointless [...] pessimistic narrative[s]" (Khan et al. 2020:478).

Paraphrase	**Intention/Function**	**Latent Meanings**	**Distribution of Roles**	**Follow-up options**
While the BRI is trustworthy and well-established, other similar initiatives are regarded as less practical. The CPEC's success is influenced by geopolitical risks originating from all of Pakistan's neighbouring countries, except for China.	Policy analysts and researchers should pay more attention to the geopolitical challenges created by other developmental projects, as the BRI has already paved the way as the superior initiative. There are many different risk factors to the CPEC in Pakistan's regional security environment, but China is a reliable partner who is contributing to stability.	The Pakistani security research community is aware of developmental alternatives in the region, however, due to the "ironclad" relationship between Beijing and Islamabad, they have to create a preferential narrative for the BRI. If armed conflict in the region arises, which ultimately would also affect the global economic markets, China is not to blame but other regional powers, or even the US as a malicious force meddling in the background. External interference with the CPEC, both physical	China and the BRI as the developmental motors in Pakistan, which are not only more reliable than other international options but can also provide security if necessary. Pakistan as the small partner in the relationship, who is fully committed to the CPEC and trusts Beijing's benignity, and the Chinese	Compare Islamabad's BRI and CPEC geopolitical assessments with analyses from other neighbouring countries in the region, in order to gauge the degree of Pakistan's critical security bias towards China. Monitor the security output of Pakistani think tanks. Even slight shifts towards more multifaceted CPEC criticism could indicate a

People who are critical of the CPEC and China's intentions are spreading malign rumours and disinformation	The CPEC and Chinese ambitions in Pakistan in general are reputable, while critics try to badmouth China and spread fear among Pakistani citizens.	and narrative-wise, is unjustified and will not be tolerated. The (alternative) facts provided on the scope of the BRI by Islamabad and Beijing are believable enough, so Pakistan has nothing to worry about.	narrative of national non-interference.	growing domestic understanding of geopolitical risks caused by China.[21]

A conclusive interpretation of these analytical results is not an easy task, as due to the overwhelming and multidimensional influence from Beijing, it is difficult to capture the correct spectrum of factors which can lead to such distorted geopolitical security perceptions in Pakistan. However, as in this case of Pakistani policy researchers and think tanks, it is at least possible to backtrack and preliminarily contextualise facilitating indicators of subversive Chinese influence operations. The compiled information from the *China Index* shows, that Pakistan is heavily influenced by China in the areas of foreign policy, technology, and military, but also in its academic domain (China Index 2022b). Notably, this academic influence does not stop at policy and security studies – as highlighted by the analysis above – but has apparently spread to other areas of Pakistani social sciences. In one case, a Pakistani linguist research team, conducting a "critical discourse analysis" (!), does not seem to be fazed even in the slightest, that the local CPEC discourse is essentially overloaded with propagandistic Chinese jargon, praising the China-Pakistan "friendship [as] higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the deepest sea" (Afzaal/Hu/Chishti/Khan 2019:8). Narrowing down the focus area on Chinese subversion of Pakistani think tanks tasked with security studies, a somewhat "unhealthy" proximity to Chinese officials and institutions transpires. For example, one of the advisory boards of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad includes Ms. Pang Chunxue, the current Chargé d'affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan (ISSI 2024). Even more worrisome, the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) openly admits its affiliation with the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC) on its website (IPRI 2024), which is known to be a united front organisation active in overseas influence operations (cf. Joske 2020). With this in

[21] During my personal interview with Dr. Si-Fu Ou the expert mentioned that from the Taiwanese perspective, there seem to be slight Pakistani efforts to decrease the dependencies from China (INDSR headquarters, Taipei, April 25, 2024). Supportive of Dr. Ou's argument are my personal observations, as I can attest that during my time in Taiwan, I have discovered the local presence of a surprisingly lively Pakistani academic and business community. More dedicated research projects towards these topical processes regarding Pakistani diversification of international cooperations could prove to be insightful for the political science research field.

mind, the provocative title of this chapter signalises a potential type of Chinese subversion in Pakistan: The use of *agents of influence* or *useful idiots*. Whereas both terms were frequently used as part of Soviet intelligence terminology, there is a fine distinction between them. Vasiliy Mitrokhin provides the following definition for an *agent of influence*:

> An agent operating under intelligence instructions who uses his official or public position, and other means, to exert influence on policy, public opinion, the course of particular events, the activity of political organizations and state agencies in target countries. (Mitrokhin 2002:3)

While there is a general requirement for *agents of influence* to be respected members of society who have a certain authority in their respective fields, *useful idiots* on the other hand are "naive or credulous [individuals] who can be manipulated or exploited to advance a cause or political agenda" (Merriam-Webster 2024). As it has already been described in the literature that Beijing "cultivates ties with individuals" (Charon/Jeangène Vilmer 2021:415) to shape them into these types of CCP instruments, it is very likely that this practice also takes place in Pakistan. However, at this point it is not clear if the research provided by the aforementioned think tanks and policy researchers is the result of conscious manipulation of Pakistan's geopolitical perceptions by coopted agents, or the product of misguided researchers, whose negligence of genuinely China-critical analyses is caused by latent institutional pressures or biases. Nonetheless, the fine structure analysis exposes that Chinese subversive efforts have already managed to penetrate Pakistan's geopolitical security research elite to an alarming degree from a national security perspective, as they essentially attest the CPEC an uncontested metaphorical "security clearance".

5.2 The potential Chinese revival of a subversive Soviet tactic

This final analytical example is dedicated to contextualising and discussing the most significant insights shared by my Taiwanese interview partner, Dr. Si-Fu Ou. After outlining some of the lesser-known geopolitical and geostrategic risks associated with the BRI, he noted that Beijing simply cannot share its true intentions behind the initiative. Despite not further detailing this specific train of thought, Dr. Ou's opinion on this critical angle of the BRI was that "in the future, military [aspects will be] more important". When asked about the local implementing bodies of oversea BRI projects – referring to the plethora of participating Chinese construction agencies – he made

an important observation: In order to shield the Chinese construction corps from too much exposure to the local influences of the host country, the general labour force has to reside in secluded dormitories, specifically constructed for this purpose.[22] Even if to a lesser extent, according to Dr. Ou this practice carries the "legacy of collectivism".[23] Even though these statements about Chinese intentions and organisational procedures within the BRI are not exclusively applicable to Pakistan, the subsequent information suggests that they manifest in more explicit forms there.

Paraphrase	**Intention/Function**	**Latent Meanings**	**Distribution of Roles**	**Follow-up options**
Beijing is unwilling to share its real motivations behind the BRI. (Contrary to the official narrative), the BRI will play a military role in the future. Oversea BRI labour forces are not allowed to intermingle with the locals and are housed in specially segregated areas. 20th-century practices of collectivism are kept alive by modern-day China.	Beijing is spreading disinformation about the true scope of the BRI and has ulterior motives. The dual-use or military dimensions of BRI projects should not be underestimated. China is concerned about too much movement – both physical and mental – of its workers abroad and tries to limit their range of motion. Invoking the mental imagery associated with the *Great Leap Forward*. Agricultural collectivization stood in the forefront of the movement, but collectivist ideology also extremely effected the social cohesion of Chinese people.[24]	A secretive government, which is hiding its intentions from the public, is up to no good. This could be interpreted as a Taiwanese warning to the international community. China uses the BRI to expand militarily, and people have to be made aware! China has the power and authority to establish "restricted areas" on foreign soil, which not only affects Chinese citizens but also the local populations. Parts of distinctly communist ideology have infiltrated Pakistan and have led to the physical and psychological manifestation of (former) Chinese political thought abroad.	Beijing as a dishonest (ascending) major power, with the mission to covertly expand its hard power presence beyond its current borders. Pakistan, in the morphing role of China's willing "colonial vassal" (cf. Rubin 2020), who sacrifices important aspects of its national security, caused by its opportunistic and praetorian leadership style.	(Academically) disregard the official narrative from Beijing and start developing a more holistic understanding of how to read China's intentions behind the BRI. Develop more advanced policy-analyses and recommendations on the critical effects of dual-use BRI facilities. Conducting interviews and fieldwork in the proximity of difficult-to-access BRI labour forces could expand the knowledge on the implementation of subversive Chinese influence operations abroad.

[22] Quite often, oversea BRI projects rely on Chinese workers who are brought in, as Beijing sees them as cheaper, more reliable, and less "problematic" (cf. Hillman/Tippett 2021).
[23] Dr. Si-Fu Ou, personal interview, INDSR headquarters, Taipei, April 25, 2024.
[24] Contemporary western scholars might be unfamiliar with or have a distorted perception of all-out collectivism in communist countries. Though unintended, collectivist practices often le(a)d to distrust and tensions between social groups, only to be covered by superficial harmony (cf. Talhelm 2019).

To strengthen the significant weight of Dr. Ou's input and the attached fine structure analysis, a very tangible set of circumstantial evidence regarding China's subversive influence in Pakistan is added. While the growing dual-use aspects of BRI projects and the seclusion of Chinese construction corps are not new phenomena and fairly well-known, the implications of these practices within the context of potential influence operations are extensive. To shine light on how China could utilise subversion to lay the groundwork for a more permanent hard power presence in Pakistan, the following argumentative lines are meant to contextualise currently undergoing ambiguous processes in Pakistan's security environment.

As described in Chapter 5, Pakistan has been battling with endemic and rampant corruption in nearly all aspect of government and society, which naturally also affects their executive forces. Aside the non-transparent and highly militarised governance structures – serving the interests of former and current armed forces commanders – Pakistan is also struggling with an unorganised law enforcement system that is marked by internal fragmentation and multiple loyalties (cf. Masudi/Mustafa 2023). These structural deficits have created a fragile executive ecosystem in Pakistan, which is susceptible to external influence. In a report to the RAND Corporation, William Rosenau has described how insurgents were able to infiltrate the military, the police, and even intelligence services in various countries of the Middle East and South Asia, emphasising that "subversion cannot be dismissed as a Cold War problem" (Rosenau 2007:13). If "simple" terrorists and insurgent forces could shoulder such a task, then so is China with its well-equipped and resourceful intelligence network that has been described in detail in Chapter 2.2. What are some of the indicators that Beijing might be meddling with Pakistan's executive branches in a subversive manner? In an effort to monitor and better understand the global expansion of Chinese technology companies, the Cyber Policy Centre at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has created an online database. Adjusting the search parameters of this online database named *Mapping China's Tech Giants*, to only showcase Chinese sensitive cooperations in Pakistan that could potentially negatively affect local executive forces, two important aspects arise: Within the framework of the CPEC, China has not only implanted a whole array of data centres, but also various surveillance projects, and even a jointly operated satellite centre running on Chinese technology. However, more importantly, it appears that *Xiamen Meiya Pico Information Co. Ltd* has provided

training courses to the Pakistani police. The company, which was added to a US watch list in 2019 due to alleged human rights violations, is specialised in the areas of digital forensics and cybersecurity training. While *Meiya Pico* services and products have also been increasingly offered in other nations via BRI cooperation projects (ASPI 2021), the presence of this particular company in Pakistan is truly problematic, based on the country's aforementioned corruptibility, organisational permeability, and overall geopolitical significance for China. Furthermore, the Chinese oversea promotion of *Meiya Pico* can not easily be dismissed as an isolated case of Beijing's overly eager interest in Pakistan's security environment but has to be considered against the backdrop that the Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi proactively wants to "deepen law enforcement cooperation with the Pakistani side" (Xinhua 2020).

Another indicator for an evolving Chinese hard power presence in Pakistan is the increasing deployment of private security companies (PSCs), officially tasked with the protection of BRI assets and personnel. Even though these paramilitary forces are not yet allowed to operate independently and do not conduct their operations on a permanent basis, policy advisor Sergey Sukhankin has noticed a trend:

> [...] given the growing number of security incidents and frequent inability of the Pakistani side to ensure the safety of those Chinese nationals working in the country, Beijing has intensified its requests concerning the option of using its own security providers on Pakistani soil. (Sukhankin 2023)

While this idea has been criticized by Islamabad's security experts and politicians, the notion that the Pakistani military has already tasked a whopping 15,000 troops with the sole job of protecting CPEC assets just highlights how precarious the security milieu in Pakistan truly is. Despite these numerable forces, Pakistan seems to be unable to "ensure the comprehensive security of Chinese nationals and assets" (ibid.), therefore Beijing currently faces a dilemma regarding the CPEC's success: How to credibly justify the actual deployment of Chinese armed personnel for the safe and sustainable implementation of CPEC projects, while circumventing opposing forces who think "PSCs could compromise Pakistan's sovereignty and independence" (ibid.)?

A potential solution to this problem could be provided in an exemplary *hypothetical* (!) scenario, in which the logic and techniques of subversion and active measures are combined, granting China the desired outcome while providing Beijing with a "clean

slate". Before outlining the details, it needs to be mentioned that while this is just a theoretical assumption, the rationale of the following example is indeed rooted in a real and tangible layer of circumstantial evidence: Aware of the potential consequences and political fallout of prematurely deploying Chinese PSCs in Pakistan, China's intelligence apparatus could attempt to subvert, coopt, and then utilise one of the many militant factions in Pakistan for false flag operations against CPEC infrastructure. This could contribute to the tilting of critical perceptions in Islamabad and would create the necessary preconditions for Chinese boots on the ground in Pakistan. There are two existing loopholes in Pakistan's CPEC related security environment that could be exploited for subversive Chinese operations, leading towards the implementation of active measures. First, the cunning ingenuity of such an approach lays within the fact, that contemporary militant forces in Pakistan's Balochistan province already "describ[e] Beijing as an 'occupier'" (ibid.), thus pre-formulating a target for radical Islamist groups in the region. As a result, even a more intensified attack series on CPEC ventures in Balochistan would probably not raise certain suspicions in Islamabad, as the province is "one of the key junctions for Chinese economic interests in the country" (ibid.). The second, even more intricate loophole, for the possible Chinese infiltration of these insurgents, can be located in the founding history of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Even though there are not many sources, and the reliability of this information is questionable, a 2005 report from Turkmenistan found, that the BLA was actually the brainchild of two former KGB agents code-named "Misha" and "Sasha", and that the original movement from the 1970s only disappeared because they lost funding from Moscow (Saeedi et al. 2005). Regarding the present-day sabotage activities in Balochistan, the two retired Russian intelligence officers state that "[a]ctually, most of the elements were in place, though dormant, and it was not difficult for anyone with sufficient resources to reactivate the whole thing" (ibid.). To solidify the explosive claims of this report, a 2010 journal article written by a local researcher from Balochistan, also claims to see a connection between the BLA and a foreign intelligence agency. While it appears that she has strongly referenced the Turkmenistanian report from 2005, Musarrat Jabeen's notion that "Baloch students in Russia were cultivated actively by the KGB" (2010:39) strikes a more profound chord. Even if just a fraction of this story is true, it conveys the idea that militant forces in Pakistan can apparently be coopted to some degree and are willing to cooperate with external powers to achieve their own objectives. Within the context of the increasing

Russification of Chinese influence operations and aided by the argument made in Chapter 5 regarding China's potential transitioning from defensive to offensive military decision-making (cf. Salisbury 2024), there is no good reason to assume that Chinese or China-friendly intelligence agents would not attempt a similar strategy in Pakistan. From Beijing's perspective, the overall social and political conditions for subversive and divisive approaches in Pakistan could not be any more favourable than now, as after the ousting of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2023 the country resembles a tinderbox, and a potential "[c]oup would put Pakistan squarely in China's bloc" (Ibrahim 2023). These arguments sum up the more overt forms of subversive activities that could potentially lead to a more explicit manifestation of Chinese hard power in Pakistan.

The final supportive example introduces a method of subliminal territorial and social control and emphasises the eventuality of China reviving this Soviet subversive tactic for its implementation in Pakistan. However, to make the example more plausible and tangible, some historical and more recent context is required. As highlighted in Chapter 2.2, subversion with Chinese characteristics can utilise quite sophisticated methods to undermine a target nation's jurisdiction or sovereignty. The silent establishment of the so-called Chinese "overseas service stations" in foreign countries is highly controversial, as they are extralegal bodies operating without local permission and facilitate criminal activities, such as the coercion of China's diaspora and forced repatriations. While the currently available public information does not indicate that China's has installed these service stations in Pakistan (cf. Safeguard Defenders 2022), it would be surprising if China would not attempt to establish similar patterns of surveillance and control over its citizens in the country, in which it has the biggest vested interests. While this practice in itself is already a form of subversion, for this example another aspect of these service stations is relevant: Their seamless and unsuspicious integration into their environment. They are often part of legally operating business entities, such as real estate and property management agencies, or attached to cultural exchange clubs. Figure 9 shows one of the alleged stations in a suburb of London, highlighting their generally inconspicuous nature.

Figure 9 49 Watford Way, an alleged overseas police station, in London, United Kingdom (Voice of America 2022)

While these physical manifestations of Chinese state power abroad are still visible to the public, there are types of subversion which are even less discernible as such. For example, it is known that China has built a domestic network of so-called “black jails”, which are extralegal detention centres established by Chinese security forces and PSCs. While the Chinese government consistently denies the existence of such facilities, there are people who have managed to escape from these sites and shared their experiences with the media. Alarmingly, recent reports have claimed that China also operates similar black jails abroad, which are situated within hotels, guesthouses, or private residences (The Associated Press 2021). The subsequent argument does not attempt to convey the idea that China operates similarly oppressive compounds in Pakistan, but to reinforce the notion that Beijing might be experimenting with a specific Soviet-era technique of subversion, while hiding it in plain sight.

To contextualise this technique in its potential present-day form in Pakistan, a brief description of its Cold War iteration in the Eastern Bloc is necessary. In a personal interview with Ivan Sidorov*[25], formerly enlisted within one of the national armed forces of the Warsaw Pact, the retired officer recounted the communist party practice of employing so-called *sectorists.* A sectorist was a special type of police officer, whose

[25] Upon request, the name of this interview partner has been pseudonymised, and specific geolocatable details are omitted hereafter.

only task was to observe and keep order in a specific district of a city (= sector). Officially, they were employed by their respective governments to serve the local community, but their actual role was to represent the totalitarian communist state authority and to let citizens constantly know that the “Big Brother” is keeping an eye on them. Their day-to-day operations also included simple administrative tasks in their local bureau, but more importantly they were available for citizen requests around the clock, as every household had their local sectorist’s phone number on speed dial. This seamless integration of sectorists into the daily lives of citizens gave them an almost omnipresent informational advantage, as they tried to monitor all types of activities in their neighbourhood. This constant observation of people made them deeply distrustful of one another, as it could happen anytime that a “friendly” neighbour reported something “suspicious” to the ever-available sectorist. While this collectively coercive system of surveillance already constitutes a form of societal subversion by state power, there was another level of intricacy to this system. According to Sidorov, the sectorists often worked in tandem with the secret police, who not only acted upon the information they received from the sectorists but were permanently on the lookout for civilians who could be turned into informants. This layered network of informants, observers, and agents allowed the various communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc to subversively exert their power domestically but has also been applied abroad to aid the pursuit of political dissidents.[26]

This fascinating account of communist power, which infiltrates societies and tangibly restricts their scope of action, can be substantiated with an observation made my Gallagher and Miller in a different, yet related context:

> Communist control had both ideational and spatial dimensions. Ideology replaced other values and norms of China's old society. Communist organization embedded the Party in all social, economic and political structures [...]. (Gallagher/Miller 2021:1013)

While the research focus of these authors was on China's contemporary information control strategy, apparently there used to be a common theme between European and Chinese communism regarding *spatial* characteristics, which also further validates the geopolitical anchoring of this thesis. To showcase this spatial dimension, and how the sectorist’s community-oriented policing was integrated into the daily lives of citizens,

[26] Mr. Ivan Sidorov, personal interview, March 24, 2024.

Ivan Sidorov has further provided a real-life example from his home town. Even though the organisational network of sectorists had been disbanded in many parts of the Warsaw Pact after the fall of the Soviet Union, remnants of the physical infrastructure can still be found today. In Figure 10, a former sectorist bureau is displayed in the lower centre part, which used to be an integrated monitoring station of a residential building complex.

Figure 10 Former sectorist bureau (Ivan Sidorov 2024)

While for a western observer, who is unfamiliar with the concept of sectorists, this picture would merely show an entrance area to a building, for people who personally grew up with and are acquainted with the various manifestations of totalitarian communist control, the discreet booth next to the door is discernible as the observation window of a sectorist. This critical input from an actual contemporary witness provides the necessary conceptual nexus for the argument, that China potentially employs a concept similar to this Soviet-era technique of subversion in Pakistan.

The hypothesis, that China could experiment with the implementation of a subversive network of sectorists in Pakistan, is based on a set of circumstantial evidence and personal observations. It is not known to the author if the explicit concept of sectorists has ever been applied under that name in China, but there is a sufficient amount of secondary data indicating that Chinese city governments use a “sectoral” thinking from an organisational standpoint of view and have a history of experimenting with concepts of local security provision. One example from Beijing shows, that while the provision of basic services is a central part of self-organised community associations, “[e]ach

neighbourhood has its own residents' committee responsible for [...] public safety" (Teets 2013:27). Within this communal system of collective security, another factor is noticeable: The widespread use of security guards, often for no apparent reason. While their services would make sense at the perimeters of gated communities, government buildings, or other relevant public areas worthy of protection, the typical booths of Chinese security guards can be found in many residential areas of urban China.[27] To illustrate, what these security guard booths look like, and for lack of suitable visual material from mainland China, Figure 11 depicts an equivalent example from Taipei, Taiwan.[28]

Figure 11 A typical sentry box with security guard in front, Taipei, Taiwan (Source: Author)

As it is the case for many of its counterparts in both China and Taiwan, the true necessity of this particular security guard booth is questionable. While the convenient location next to an underground car park probably serves the official narrative, multiple questions remain: Why have continuous expenses for sentry box and security guard if the car park entry system is already automated? Why install a security "outpost" in a

[27] As I have worked in Beijing for six months in 2017, I personally made the observation that security guards and their little booths are interestingly located within many residential neighbourhoods. While some of the guards were patrolling the area, the majority of them just sat in their sentry boxes all day long and observed their surroundings.

[28] Similar to my experience in China, these types of security guards are a regular sight in Taiwanese cities as well.

residential area, when the next police station is not even 100 metres down the street? Why does a civilian neighbourhood need constant digital and analogue monitoring from dedicated security personnel?[29] Some Chinese researcher from the fields of architecture and urban planning argue, that gated communities in China have a history of being used as tools of social control and that many residents actually appreciate the presence of security guards (cf. Hamama/Liu 2020; cf. Li/Wan/He 2021). However, these academic contributions do not critically reflect upon their overly frequent deployment in other contexts, nor discuss the possible infiltration of state power via coopted security personnel. Consequently, the tangible and conceptual similarities are striking, between this systematic use of Chinese security guards for public surveillance and the network of sectorists in former communist countries. Next, some of the indicators, that China might be implementing a similar concept in Pakistan, are discussed.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a growing number of Chinese private security companies operating in Pakistan, often working in tandem with local police forces to protect CPEC assets and Chinese nationals. In a recent development, the federal police of Islamabad has announced the establishment of a "District Foreign Security Cell", which essentially requires "[o]ver 1,000 Chinese nationals in Islamabad to [...] inform police about their movement" (The Economic Times 2022). While it is not exactly known who will be responsible for the actual security provision within these new security cells, the statement that "paramilitary troops [...] or patrolling unit[s]" (ibid.) will be deployed, indicates a joint Chinese-Pakistani operational implementation of this new concept. A key element, connecting the earlier argument about the widespread system of Chinese security guards with these recent dynamics in Pakistan, can be found with some online research in the Chinese province of Guangdong. There, a company named *Guangzhou Moneybox Steel Structure Engineering Co., Ltd* manufactures prefabricated and portable security guard boxes in different variations. The products of this company are listed on a well-known Chinese B2B wholesale website targeting the international markets, where – among others –

[29] With the help of a fellow Taiwanese student, I attempted to "decipher" the official purpose of a guard booth at a different location in Taipei. In that case, the booth was located within a public park and served as a flash flood observation point. While this argument may be plausible near bodies of water, as this is indeed a dangerous phenomenon often occurring in Taiwan (cf. Teng/Hsu/Wu/Chen 2006), it is less so in a different set of geographical and situational contexts.

these guard boxes are referred to as “police stations” (Made-in-China 2024a). While *Guangzhou Moneybox Steel Structure Engineering Co., Ltd* is not the sole manufacturer of these sentry boxes, and this specific phrasing might be explained as a translation error, it could also indicate that within the Chinese society, these types of security guard booths are generally associated with authority and executive state power. Figure 12 below shows this prefabricated sentry box, which shares many functional and aesthetic similarities to the example highlighted in Figure 11.

Figure 12 Sandwich Panel House Prefabricated Sentry Box Prefab Police Station (Made-in-China 2024a)

The idea, that these inconspicuous guard houses might potentially be repurposed in a more intricate way by Chinese intelligence services abroad, is supported by auxiliary information attached to similar products on the same website. In a dedicated FAQ section of the aforementioned B2B website for Chinese suppliers, their oversea export expertise to foreign governments is emphasised with the words “we love to do it [and] have cooperated with [...] Pakistan Government” (Made-in-China 2024b). This could explain how the physical components of a Chinese sectorist-like network of security guards coopted by state agencies are implemented in Pakistan without drawing too much attention. But how would the organisational and administrative aspects of such a network – embodied by perceived figures of executive authority – be transferred from China to Pakistan?

The answer to this question might lie in the fact, that in the border region between China and Pakistan – which naturally plays an integral role in the transnational implementation of the CPEC – there is an exceptionally strong institutional overlay between state-governed, official Chinese police forces and various paramilitary organisations. A transparent navigation through these multiple organisations, to find out who does what and how, is an almost futile task. As the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) describes in a report, policing tasks in the region "[are] carried out by several agencies with differing duties and separate command structures, some at the local level and some at the national level, but all ultimately under the CCP's strict control" (Carrdus 2023). Not counting the Chinese private PSCs, there are at least five different types of policing agencies active in the Xinjiang border region, among them the *People's Police*, *Special Police*, or so-called *Chengguan*, who are meant to enforce local bylaws, but "have a reputation throughout all of the PRC for corruption and thuggery" (ibid.). Most important for the current argumentative line regarding the deployment of Chinese security guards in ambiguous roles, Carrdus notes "that [p]rivate security guards in the PRC commonly wear uniforms deliberately intended to resemble if not actually imitate police uniforms" (ibid.). This observation is reinforced by Suzanne E. Scoggins in her book *Policing China: Street-Level Cops in the Shadow of Protest*, where she states that "[s]ometimes it is almost impossible to know if someone is an official police officer without asking him or her directly" (Scoggins 2021:27). Within this opaque system of overlapping official and unofficial policing authorities in China and its border areas, another relevant factor shines through: According to a police chief in China's Inner Mongolia province, his public security bureau has "recruit[ed] one in every 33 local residents as an informant [...] to collect information about conflicts that might lead to complaints to higher authorities and to discover 'non-harmonious elements'" (Branigan 2010). While these numbers should be treated with caution, and it is difficult to gauge the extent of such a network of informants in the Xinjiang province, these statements nonetheless highlight the potential dimensions and reach of China's security apparatus.

In the wake of China's growing ambitions to improve the CPEC's security environment via paramilitary police forces and PSCs, there is a real possibility that this domestic system of surveillance by various authorities could witness a spillover effect from China to Pakistan. Nonetheless, the argument here is not that all ambiguously

uniformed Chinese security guards in Pakistan would act as sectorists, but that Beijing apparently has already set up all the necessary infrastructural, personnel, and organisational elements, for instructed Chinese agents to perform sectorist-like roles along the CPEC. This approximation, of how and by what agents China potentially executes influence operations in Pakistan, constitutes the final element of this chapter. The implementation of such a system in Pakistan would positively contribute to the solution of China's CPEC-related policy problems outlined in Chapter 5, as it would allow Beijing to expand its informational oversight in Pakistan while providing an additional layer of security for already existing BRI assets. Furthermore, it could facilitate the real-time observation of the Chinese diaspora in Pakistan (cf. Khan 2019) and collect valuable intelligence on the CPEC's security environment. Ultimately, China's ability to create restricted areas of spatially segregated living quarters for CPEC labour forces in Pakistan and the potential establishment of local Chinese networks of observers and informants performing as sectorists, could lead to the following outcome: The creation of subversive and "counter-hegemonic spaces" (Gallagher/Miller 2021:1012), which – due to their ability to subliminally emit sociopolitical influence – could gradually lead towards more permanent forms of Chinese hard power in Pakistan. Dynamics like these are highly dreaded by the CCP domestically as a source of political resistance (ibid.), but in the context of Chinese influence operations abroad they are probably welcome, as they allow the communist party to "shape the world environment in its own favor while penetrating its target countries' institutions and damaging their social cohesion" (Chen 2022:149). To finalise the argument about Chinese security guards potentially playing a more important role in Pakistan than expected, an interesting statement by a local politician from Gwadar is revealing: "There is no CPEC in Gwadar, except security check posts that exist in the name of CPEC in Gwadar" (Notezai 2024). While this might be the exaggerated opinion of an oppositional individual (ibid.), this delicate *in situ* observation of China's ambitions in Pakistan not only challenges the officially propagated narrative, but also questions Beijing's real motivations behind the development of security infrastructure along the BRI.

6 Discussion

The aim of this final section is to reflect upon the initial hypotheses and to provide answers to the research questions presented at the beginning of this thesis, while additionally highlighting the value of the comparative methodology. After presenting the key findings, some of the most relevant interpretations are discussed. Complementarily, a set of implications and limitations to the results are outlined, followed by preliminary recommendations for future research.

After reviewing the historical development of political warfare and the emergence of subversion with Chinese characteristics throughout Chapter 2, while considering existing strains of critical BRI research (cf. Russel/Berger 2020) in Chapter 3, the answer to the first research question, how China integrates different types of influence operations into the initiative, is the following: Having constructed an exceptionally well-funded and increasingly institutionalised organisational network for influence operations, the CCP and the UFWD utilise the interagency character of LSG's, funding bodies such as the AIIB, and the manipulative power of narratives for the inconspicuous integration of geopolitical, geoeconomic, or geostrategic elements of Chinese subversion into the BRI. With the help of the analytical examples from the case studies, a solid layer of circumstantial evidence has been collected to answer the second research question, regarding what types of subversive Chinese influence operations could have been trialled or implemented along BRI in Vietnam and Pakistan within the last decade, and by which agents of influence. The findings for Vietnam indicate, that China is actively attempting to influence the perceptions of BRI-critical Vietnamese researchers and scholars via conference invitations, while also artificially emphasising the communist narrative between Beijing and Hanoi. Additionally, there are signs that the Confucius Institute in Hanoi might be operating beyond its official scope of action, in an effort to subvert traditional sociocultural practices in Vietnam. In the case of Pakistan, the overall influence of Beijing over Islamabad has apparently also profoundly affected Pakistan's ability to objectively assess its own national security environment. The near complete lack of critical CPEC assessments by Pakistani researchers from various fields and a questionably high pro-China bias are indicators, that China's growing geopolitical efforts in Pakistan are aided by potentially coopted agents of influence or misguidedly acting useful idiots. Furthermore, there are

several clues that China has created the organisational and infrastructural preconditions in Pakistan to potentially operate a subversive network of informants disguised as inconspicuous security guards, an approach that has strongly similarities to the Soviet-era practice of employing sectorists, a special type of policing authority tasked with the constant observation of local neighbourhoods. Finally, the combination of information from primary and secondary sources allows for a preliminary answering of the third research question, as in what are potentially overlooked sharp power blind spots in current BRI-related foreign policy and security research and how could they be addressed. Building on the definition of sharp power outlined in Chapter 2.1, regarding an aggressor's ability to distort the informational environment of a target country, the analyses made in Chapter 4.1 and 5.1 support the idea that secondary BRI activities – such as promotional events, university cooperations, and collaborative research projects – are prone to subversive exploitation from China. This could be explained by the circumstance, that these facets of the BRI do not constitute the core focus points of the initiative, which are infrastructure development and the improvement of connectivity, and are therefore maybe less exposed to rigorous reviewing processes by policy and security researchers. An initial solution, to adequately address these potentially problematic blind spots in BRI-related foreign policy and security research, could be the reinforced emphasis on the principles of "trusted research" (cf. Karásková/Šebok/Blablová 2022). This approach suggests the formulation of protective evaluation criteria for research cooperations with China, and the application of "evidence-based guidelines for [...] stakeholders" (ibid.:5).

As argued in the initial chapter of this thesis, the discussion and interpretation of research results through the lens of the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical school of thought has been indeed helpful to contextualise various aspects of China's presumed foreign policy rationale. This assessment is based on the facts, that in this thesis not only multiple Chinese sources were explicitly referencing the "Pivot Area" and related terminology, but that – as outlined in Chapter 5 – apparently China's foreign policy in Asia is implicitly driven by an expansive ideology akin to a "New Great Game". The subsequently introduced hybrid theoretical framework of realist constructivism has been equally useful for the facilitation of a more nuanced discussion regarding the BRI's multifaceted impact on participating countries. On the one hand, the constructivist angle allows seeing, that despite many criticizable aspects, such as

lengthy implementation times of projects and unevenly distributed funds, the BRI does bring some level of economic development and improved connectivity to both Vietnam and Pakistan. On the other hand, a more realist approach would argue that the intensified Chinese presence abroad via BRI projects could result in the undermining of these host countries' geopolitical sovereignty, as a result of Beijing's quest for self-interested regional security maximisation. However, the true value of realist constructivism – as a more holistic prism of analysis – lies in its ability to convey two complementary ideas simultaneously: While feeding the cooperative and beneficial aspects of the BRI to the international community and the media, Beijing could potentially exploit the narrative superstructure of the initiative in a realist manner, in order to systematically implement subversive influence operations in participating countries. A strategy like this would be in line with China's novel "Major Country Diplomacy" (cf. Young 2021) and could eventually lead to an authoritarian "norm cascade" (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998:895), a desirable global political development for Beijing that has been described in more detail in Chapter 1.2.

The analytical results outlined in the respective case studies support the common practice of applying comparative methodologies in geopolitical studies, as one of the advantages of this approach is its ability to really highlight the adaptiveness and ingenuity of Chinese political warfare practices. The versatility described in this thesis, with which Beijing attempts to exert its influence over other nations, can be regarded as in indirect continuation of ancient Chinese principles of asymmetrical warfare. This notion is based on one of Sun Tzu's wisdoms from his book *The Art of War*, where he emphasises to "not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but [to] let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances." (2000:23). Even if not consciously acting upon Sun Tzu's ideas, the analysed subversive tactics of Chinese political warfare strengthen the argument that the CCP is flexible in applying a myriad of measures to disrupt the (geopolitical) power of its enemies. As it has been concluded in the Vietnam case study, the subversive Chinese influence on researchers and scholars, and the CCP's interference in Vietnamese political and sociocultural strata, have both the potential to disrupt Hanoi's "ideological leadership [or] cohesive system of governance." (Cohen 2015:2). For the Pakistan case study, the analysis indicates that China has potentially already subverted the country's capability to correctly assess its own national security environment to a degree, where

Islamabad's actual "military strength and the willingness to use it" (ibid.) might be affected. The often unpredictable and dynamic nature of these Chinese influence operations necessitates international foreign-policy analysts and national security advisors to think outside the box regarding subliminal risks emanated by the BRI, and to be well aware of their own nations' strategic Achilles' heel. Furthermore, the findings from both case studies strongly support the observations of Charon and Jeangène Vilmer, that there is an ongoing "Russification of Chinese influence operations" (2021:620). The active realisation by the political and security research community, that there is a growing conceptual and methodological convergence between Chinese, Russian and former Soviet types of political warfare, could allow analysts to draw insights from a larger, pre-existent universe of information. In other words, a more thorough look into historical Soviet archives from the Cold War period could help to counter the current application of Chinese subversive methods as an integrated part of the BRI. This assessment can be solidified by the findings of Polish policy analysts Jolanta Darczewska and Piotr Żochowski, who state that "contemporary forms of active measures are largely based on patterns already known and described in the past [which] may help to assess and identify their covert mechanisms [today]" (2017). Finally, the results of the analyses made in this thesis seem to partly challenge certain streams within the current academic perception, that modern forms of political warfare increasingly rely on digital forms of disinformation and technically sophisticated approaches like online astroturfing. As the UFWD regularly attempts to influence international scholars at offline events, while parts of the Chinese oversea security apparatus are potentially engaged in creating analogue networks of surveillance, the argument stands that more "classical" methods of subversion are still relevant today.

Nonetheless, the overall reliability and external validity of the presented findings are constrained by several factors. First, the generalisability of results for the Vietnam and Pakistan case studies is affected by the limited number of primary sources. Finding interview partners, who are knowledgeable about both the mechanisms of the BRI and Chinese influence operations, has been challenging, especially since experts on this matter from Mainland China are incredibly difficult to contact, and are very likely under the close scrutiny of various CCP state intelligence services. Under these circumstances, future civilian and academic research on this topic is generally constrained threefold, by the ability of international researchers to safely access local

Chinese sources, the moral accountability for the wellbeing of interview partners post-interview, and overall considerations of ethical research. These aspects directly lead to the second limiting factor of how to account for biases in non-Chinese sources of information. How can international political science and security researchers correctly gauge the extents of China's reach for global power, if the valuable domestic insights of Chinese experts are often inaccessible? Thirdly, the complex and multilayered nature of Chinese influence operations interwoven with BRI projects makes it difficult for academic research to conclusively eliminate confounders, and results in a certain level of uncertainty regarding Beijing's true intentions behind the initiative.

Lastly, the findings of this thesis are suitable to be considered for future research projects on Chinese influence operations. The incorporation of more quantitative data could reinforce the hypothesis that Beijing utilises the official narrative of the BRI as a gateway mechanism for the covert implementation of long-term influence operations in participating countries. Longitudinal studies and multi-site data collection over extended timeframes could produce more tangible results of Chinese subversion in BRI member states. Examples of quantitative data studies – adjacent to the research scope of this thesis – could be the comparative monitoring of voting behaviours in BRI member countries since the inauguration of the initiative, the critical analysis of notable foreign policy reorientations favourable for Beijing during the same period, or the academic examination of trends in BRI-related corruption cases abroad. This proposition is rooted in the findings of a nascent branch of political science and policy research, which is devoted to the empirical study of influence operations. As outlined by a group of researchers from Princeton University, the literature on influence operations suffers from significant knowledge gaps, especially regarding the tactics and mediums of influence, the gauging of relevant time horizons, and the difficulties of establishing reliable determinants of causality (Bateman et al. 2021). Alternatively, the analytical results of this thesis could contribute to the revitalisation of civilian research on methods of countersubversion, while aiding the aforementioned development of this academic branch. As suggested by security analyst William Rosenau, the strengthening of capabilities in the following three areas are key to appropriately address subversive attacks from a policy-making perspective: Reinforce counterintelligence, build policing capacities, and encourage public information strategies (2007:14). According to Rosenau, well-trained police forces with close ties

to their local communities could be able to “identify [subversive] patterns [as in] ‘connect the dots’” (ibid.:15). Particularly the findings from the Pakistan case study, where the presence of informal networks of Chinese surveillance agents is a real possibility, argue in favour of a modern and evidence-based framework of countersubversion:

> Effective countersubversive policing creates a detailed picture of a community in a way that allows anomalies – the arrival of outsiders, the influx of large amounts of cash, or the change in leadership of a community group – to be detected. (ibid.)

This assessment, which emphasises the importance of noticing relevant details and the ability to coherently assemble information gathered from investigative field research for improved policy-making, is the concluding piece of a thesis that has spotlighted China’s ability and intention to integrate subversive influence operations into its Belt and Road Initiative.

7 Conclusion

Having reviewed the historical Soviet origins of subversion and active measures, and subsequently contextualising the modern-day application of these political warfare measures as part of China's BRI, it was possible to answer all research questions of this thesis. While the results and implications are outlined in more detail in the discussion section, these are the main findings: Guided by the insights gathered from multiple expert interviews and a thorough analysis of information via a multi-method approach, it can be concluded that there is indeed a high likelihood that the Xi administration has implemented various subversive influence operations into the BRI. The CCP has achieved this goal by considerably modernising and endowing its intelligence apparatus, while using the UFWD and other party organisations to shape and infiltrate the institutional and organisational environment of the BRI. In addition, the results from the Vietnam and Pakistan case study indicate, that with the help of manipulated narratives, coopted researchers, and other agents of influence, Beijing has applied multiple different types of overt or clandestine methods of subversion in these countries over the last ten years. Furthermore, the combined analysis of secondary and primary sources has revealed, that the security threat emanated by secondary BRI activities might be underestimated by the academic research community, but that these sharp power blind spots could be preliminarily addressed via more vigorous reviewing processes and trusted research guidelines.

While these findings are somewhat limited in their external validity, due to the scarcity of primary sources regarding Chinese influence operations and the difficulties of correctly gauging Beijing's intentions behind the BRI, the results underline the importance of developing an in-depth understanding about the scope, tools, and mechanisms of contemporary Chinese political warfare measures. Due to some of the described spatial dimensions and the overall relevance of Chinese influence operations in the context of global power competition, it can be concluded that there are multiple avenues for further geopolitical research in this topic. Based on the findings from the case studies, and counterintuitively to certain digitalised research trends in political science, future BRI research efforts could focus more on the analogue dimensions of Chinese subversion, incorporating field research in difficult-to-access environments.

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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Master Thesis Interview Questions Dr. Si-Fu Ou (Questionnaire)

- What are some of the lesser-known geopolitical OR geostrategic OR geoeconomic risk factors of BRI activities for participating countries?

- Is it possible for Beijing to pursue alternative goals with BRI projects in Vietnam or Pakistan, deviant from the official narrative of economic/infrastructure development? If yes, what could they be?

- How would you describe the role of the United Front organisations within the context of BRI projects abroad?

- Can you name some of the relevant local actors/bodies tasked with the local implementation of BRI projects? For example: overseeing ministries/organisations/institutions, frequently used construction agencies, spokespeople or BRI representatives, policy advisors, media coverage, etc…

- Are you familiar with any Chinese influence operations Beijing is conducting in Vietnam or Pakistan?

- Is it possible for China to instrumentalise BRI infrastructure activities to develop certain aspects of its Sharp Power abroad?

- As outlined by previous research, how do you perceive Laos' and Cambodia's impact on Vietnamese strategic security, within the context of regional infrastructure developments under the BRI?

- What exploitable sharp power blind spots are neglected in current foreign policy research done on the BRI and how could they be accounted for?

Appendix no. 2: Master Thesis Interview Questions Ms. Oanh Thi Ta (Questionnaire)

- What is the public perception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Vietnam, and how has it changed over the last 10 years? How do policy & security experts perceive it?

- Does Beijing label its BRI projects in Vietnam as economically or politically successful or not?

- What are some of the lesser-known geopolitical OR geostrategic OR geoeconomic risk factors of BRI activities for participating countries?

- Is it possible for Beijing to pursue alternative goals with BRI projects in Vietnam, deviant from the official narrative of economic/infrastructure development? If yes, what could they be?

- Are you familiar with any local groups or organisations promoting BRI projects in Vietnam? (Trade/Industry associations, Workers Unions, grassroot organisations)

- Can you name some of the relevant (Vietnamese) actors/bodies tasked with the local implementation of BRI projects? For example: overseeing ministries/organisations/institutions, frequently used construction agencies, spokespeople or BRI representatives, policy advisors, media coverage agents, etc…

- What aspects of Chinese influence are most noticeable in Vietnamese daily life, the political or economic dimension? Have these perceptions changed over the last 10 years?

- Is it possible for China to instrumentalise BRI infrastructure activities to develop certain aspects of its Soft/Sharp Power in Vietnam?

- As outlined by previous research, how do you perceive Laos' and Cambodia's impact on Vietnamese strategic security, within the context of regional infrastructure developments under the BRI?

- How can national BRI policies be improved to address the growing security concerns of participating countries?