

## **UNPACKING CHINA'S HESITANT HEGEMONY: A LAYERED LOOK AT CHINA'S SECURITY POLICY**

Nenad Stekić, *A Hesitant Hegemon: Layers of China's Contemporary Security Policy*, Belgrade, Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2023, pp. 278.

In the 21st century, and especially in its second decade, there has been a significant restructuring of global power dynamics. The decades-long American supremacy is declining, while China is on the rise. Its accelerated growth in the economic sphere has expanded to the political and security domains, particularly in the last ten years. Thanks to the introduction of several initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and newly proposed Global Development, Global Security, and Global Civilisational initiatives, as well as its prominent role in international organisations and forums, China has made a monumental ascension in the international arena. This global stride by China has brought remarkable changes and attracted much attention, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's rapidly growing economic, technological, military, and diplomatic power has raised (Western) concerns that its pursuit of hegemony has been changing to become more assertive. Therefore, China's behaviour and its evolving role in international relations have become the backbone of numerous academic debates. Most academics focus on China's security agenda from the perspective of its competition with the US (Schweller and Pu 2011; Zhao 2019) and the (im)possibility of continuing its peaceful rise to the international throne (Buzan 2010; Brooks and Wohlforth 2015). However, there is a dearth of research in English that analyses China's role in the world through the prism of its security policy. To fill this gap, Nenad Stekić has offered a fresh perspective on China's global position through a multidimensional analysis of China's security policy in his book *A Hesitant Hegemon: Layers of China's Contemporary Security Policy*. As a result of many years of rigorous academic research, this monograph represents an extensive and innovative study of China's security policy in the post-pandemic world.

Dr Stekić sheds new light on China's role in international politics through the lens of the "hesitant hegemon" concept. The author argues that the hesitation is pivotal to explaining China's role in the post-pandemic security landscape. Starting from that premise, the author progressively unpacks the

reasons behind China's restraint in asserting full dominance across all domains and provides a nuanced understanding of its strategic goals by assessing the decision-making processes and intricate factors shaping China's behaviour on the global stage. By taking this systematic approach and placing the analysis of the layers of security policy in the wider context of Grand Strategy evolution, the author tends to fill in the gap in the current research regarding China's security policy.

At the very beginning, the author provides a brief executive summary of the entire book in English, Chinese, and Serbian. It is valuable for readers because they can quickly grasp the core ideas and the book structure and assess whether it aligns with their interests. This synopsis helps readers understand the book's structure and provides a path so they may quickly delve further into the subjects that pique their interest. The summary accurately reflects the book's content, comprised of an introduction and five thematic chapters systematically organised from more general to particular.

The introduction outlines the contents in more detail and explains the rationale behind taking the endeavour to dive deeper into the evolving position of China in the realm of global security from a novel perspective. The author emphasises an ideologically unbiased approach and reaffirms its dedication to scientific and "rigorous scholarly work based on empirical research and analysis" (Stekić 2023, 32).

The first chapter, "Understanding China's New Global Agenda: Theory and Method", establishes the theoretical foundation of this study, exploring the philosophical and historical underpinnings of China's foreign and security policy. The author opts for assessing China's peaceful rise within the Hegemonic Stability Theory and places its security policy considerations within the context of Grand Strategy "as its dominant toolkit" (Stekić 2023, 35). The author claims that the diplomatic positioning of China, particularly in the light of the (post) COVID-19 pandemic period, has been predominantly shaped by its peaceful rise, which eventually paved the way for more assertive behaviour. Furthermore, in this chapter, readers can familiarise themselves with basic concepts such as hesitancy, otherness, comprehensive national power, global security *locus*, and decoupling. The methodological part of the chapter is of particular importance as the author employs an innovative and original "layered" approach to analysing China's security policy. Dr Stekić deploys "sequencing" as an analytical tool, providing a multidimensional framework for understanding China's security policy strategic priorities through several layers: spatial-hierarchical, functional, and institutional.

*Evolution of the Chinese Global Agenda* is the title of the second chapter dedicated to the evolution of China's four grand strategies, especially

emphasising the post-pandemic landscape shaping the way for the Fifth Grand Strategy. The author acknowledges the impact of Confucianism and Taoism on China's global stance and behaviour in the international arena and then dives deeper into each of the four Grand Strategies, noticing the evolution from internal consolidation to a more assertive role that China embraced during its third Grand Strategy period (1990-2003) and the expansion of economic influence through different initiatives in the fourth Grand Strategy period (2003-2020). Lastly, the author initiates a discussion on the potential development of the Fifth Grand Strategy amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Each chapter acts as a building block, laying the groundwork for a comprehensive picture of China's security policy and adding different dimensions to the author's argument. However, the third chapter, *Sequencing the Layers of China's Contemporary Security Policy*, acts as the central pillar, providing a comprehensive analysis that makes up over a third of the book. The author provides an in-depth analysis of China's response to different threats in the changing global environment, arguing that Western containment forces China to act more assertively. The chapter is divided into three sub-chapters that align with the three layers of China's security policy. The first section tackles hierarchical-spatial layers. The author differs between a) a hierarchical sub-layer that looks into China's global security agenda (with an emphasis on the Global Security Initiative proposed in 2022), national security concerns, and human security (highlighting the role of the Global Development Initiative), and b) a spatial sub-layer that deals with policies for regions of special interest to China (East Asia, Persian Gulf, Arctic, Africa, and Oceania), including its space policy. The author also raises the question of the Belt and Road Initiative becoming obsolete in the context of rising Sino-scepticism. The section also examines the role of China in the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023. The second layer is functional and delves into Indo-Pacific security dynamics, China's diplomatic efforts, its role in mediating the Ukraine conflict, and the security vacuum in Afghanistan. This layer also encompasses issues related to the semiconductor industry, technology, arms trade, artificial intelligence, and China's cultural diplomacy. Lastly, the institutional layer provides valuable insights into the decision-making process by focusing on the roles of different entities, predominantly the Communist Party of China, state and national administration, and the People's Liberation Army (Navy), as well as the position of China in international organisations, which is significant for understanding China's efforts in shaping global norms.

Following the extensive analysis of each of the layers of China's policy in the previous chapter, the fourth chapter, *China's Security Policy in the Eyes of*

*the United States*, brings to the forefront different perceptions and delves into two sides of the coin: a) how the Pentagon views China's rise, its hegemonic ambitions, and capabilities, and b) how China perceives the global impact of US hegemony. The Pentagon's perception, based on the analysis of annual reports on China's military and security developments (2001-2021), shows that the focus of the Pentagon has shifted from China seeking supremacy to very specific security concerns, such as the Taiwan issue, thus leading to changes in US foreign policy on countering China (Stekić 2022). The Pentagon's view on three layers of China's security policy, particularly during 2022 and 2023, shows that China is about to become more militarily assertive, pushing the US to become more supportive of China's neighbouring countries. China's first-ever response to these reports came in 2022, when China rejected hawkish propaganda on "Chinese threat" and military developments, highlighting its use as a tactic for interfering in China's internal affairs (Stekić 2023). The author also analyses the "reversed perception", that is, China's view of US hegemony. Such analysis is based on reports released by the Chinese government in 2021-2023, criticising US hegemony and proving its negative effects on the global community, thus concluding that American democracy is in further decline (Stekić 2023, 230).

The title of the fifth chapter, the final one, is a thought-provoking question: "Will China continue to be a hesitating leader"? The author of this monograph avoids a definite single answer but instead presents and explores three distinct scenarios for China's future trajectory within the international system, ranging from a power content with the existing order (*status quo*), China becoming more assertive in pursuing security policy with Chinese characteristics, to a complete reshaping of the global landscape with China as the dominant unipolar leader. While the first scenario is more obsolete in current circumstances, the third one is less likely given the unwillingness of the US to cede global leadership peacefully, which would have different global implications, including "the Cold War-style standoff" (Stekić 2023, 250). In light of this, the author concludes that, at least until 2030, China becoming more assertive is the most likely scenario. In the chapter conclusion, the author reflects on China's Fifth Grand Strategy, pointing out that it has already been operational for several years.

Based on the profound analysis of theory and practice, the author contemplates two explanations for China's hesitancy: a) its philosophy and civilisational legacy that form the basis of China's benevolence (Stekić and Obradović, 2019) and b) "calm before the storm scenario", that is, China's strategy to gain time to harden its hegemony and exert dominance across different fields (Stekić 2023, 257). The findings presented in this book imply that the second explanation is more adequate.

The study's limitations are reflected in the period it covers since it focuses on factors and events that have shaped China's security policy since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic until March 2023. This period is marked by rapidly developing global changes that strongly impact China's security. On the other hand, the first two chapters provide a broader context, which, combined with the analysis of layers, enables a deeper understanding of China's intentions and its global security agenda. What sets this monograph apart is a profound analysis of an extensive variety of factors and events in the stated period and a novel methodological approach based on "sequencing" into three layers. That is also its main contribution. Considering its comprehensive and systematic approach to dissecting China's security policy through layers, this book deserves to be mandatory reading for students of international relations, politics, and security studies. Besides being beneficial to scholars and researchers, it is a valuable source of information for a broader audience interested in understanding China's foreign and security policy and, especially, its evolving role in the changing world order.

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