

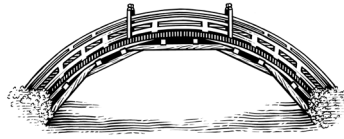
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Andrea Ghiselli's

*Protecting China's Interests Overseas:  
Securitization and Foreign Policy*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

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*Joel Wuthnow*

*Andrew Scobell*

*Jonathan Fulton*

*Zongyuan Zoe Liu*

*Andrea Ghiselli*

## Where Will the People's Liberation Army Go Next?

*Joel Wuthnow*

For its first 65 years, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) rarely ventured beyond Asia. Although Chinese troops surged across the Korean, Indian, and Vietnamese borders at times during the Cold War and prepared to take Taiwan by force, they had neither the capabilities nor a compelling rationale to deploy to more distant regions. Yet beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in the 21st century, the PLA has been out and about more widely in several contexts: UN peacekeeping missions, antipiracy operations off the Horn of Africa, and ad hoc relief missions in places such as Libya and Yemen.

In *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, Andrea Ghiselli explains this shift as deriving first from China's changing role in the world—protecting the lives and property of Chinese citizens who had “gone out” in search of new markets prompted civilian leaders to call on the PLA to be able to do more abroad. But the PLA was not initially sold on the idea. Organizations take time to adopt new missions and sometimes need a shock to stimulate deeper structural and cultural changes. Ghiselli provides convincing evidence that the 2011 Libyan Civil War, which required the PLA to repatriate some 36,000 citizens, served as a pivotal wake-up call (pp. 58–59). Spurred to action, the PLA developed new contingency plans, capabilities, training regimes, and institutions for overseas missions.

Re-engineering the PLA's identity as an expeditionary force was an easier sell for some branches than others. Ghiselli points to bureaucratic interests to explain why the PLA Navy embraced what Hu Jintao referred to as “new historic missions,” including the protection of sea lanes, even before the Libya crisis: missions in the “far seas” required larger ships and budgets (p. 56). The ground forces, by contrast, were more skeptical. I recall a PLA officer remarking that there were at best mixed feelings within the

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**NOTE:** This essay represents only the views of the author and not those of the National Defense University, U.S. Department of Defense, or U.S. government.

army about being mobilized to protect Belt and Road Initiative projects.<sup>1</sup> Such missions were a distraction from the core task of preparing to “fight and win” regional wars and did not provide as strong a justification for ground-force capabilities as a crisis on the Korean Peninsula or an invasion across the Taiwan Strait.

In retrospect, the puzzle is why the PLA’s overseas footprint has remained so modest. National and organizational interests can explain why the PLA began to refocus on new missions, but only a small fraction of the PLA—about 0.2% of the ground forces, a few naval ships, and nothing of the air force—are deployed overseas today. This volume provides a demand-side explanation: the military is only a part of the answer that Chinese leaders developed to protect overseas interests. We learn that they placed the impetus on Chinese companies, who often turned to private security contractors to meet day-to-day security needs. A supply-side explanation would focus more on limited capabilities and competing missions, especially pertaining to Taiwan, that tie PLA resources to Asia.

*Protecting China’s Interests Overseas* is strong on history, and in its final pages it brings us into the present with a discussion of why the PLA overcame its aversion to overseas bases to open its first large military outpost in Djibouti in 2017. But the book missed an opportunity to look ahead. A key question is: Will the dynamics that brought the PLA to where it is today persist, or will the PLA be tasked with more daunting overseas requirements? In the past, the PLA only needed to handle nontraditional security threats, such as piracy and terrorism. In an age of strategic competition, however, China’s leaders could also fear the prospect that military conflict with the United States will no longer be limited to Asia. Horizontal escalation could put China’s overseas energy imports at risk of U.S. interdiction, just to name one example. One can also imagine China contemplating the use of force to intimidate smaller states overseas.

The PLA is already taking several steps to prepare for combat-oriented tasks far away from China. These steps include expanding its arsenal of long-range precision strike weapons, adding “blue water” surface combatants at a rapid pace, conducting long-range bomber flights out to the second island chain, and holding combat-oriented drills with Russia as far away as the Mediterranean Sea. Of course, cyberweapons already allow the PLA to strike targets in Washington from the comfort of an office building in Shanghai. Underscoring such patterns, the 2020 edition of the *Science*

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<sup>1</sup> Author interview with an officer of the PLA, 2018.

of *Military Strategy*, published by China's National Defense University, advocated preparing for combat in faraway "strategically important areas," including a new class of "maritime mobile operations."<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about the PLA in the years ahead not only leads us to consider new missions and new capabilities but also the barriers that would need to be overcome. One challenge is limited long-range transport, though the PLA is quickly filling the gap with assets such as the Y-20 airlifter and Type 075 landing helicopter dock. Another challenge is overseas access: the PLA currently has only one overseas base but is reported to be in discussions for new facilities in places such as the United Arab Emirates and Equatorial Guinea. Additionally, new command structures would have to be created if the PLA desired to conduct joint operations abroad.<sup>3</sup> There is also an important human capital dimension in that few PLA troops have any practical overseas experience.

Considering the nature of China's military role overseas in the coming years would also require attention to how the strategic landscape is evolving. Critical questions would include whether the Taiwan issue remains unresolved (if China seizes the island, the PLA would then be much freer to focus capabilities on other regions); whether U.S.-China relations have devolved into an armed rivalry, including Cold War-style proxy wars; whether Beijing has abandoned its current reluctance to forge alliances, which could enable it to forward-position more forces but could also result in China becoming more enmeshed in foreign disputes; and whether China has enough clout in regional organizations that it can secure "authorization" for almost any sort of military intervention.


In a fascinating chapter, Ghiselli highlights the role of another, overlooked variable: public opinion. One prompt for greater attention by Chinese leadership to protecting overseas interests in the 2000s was that the public—especially nationalistic "keyboard warriors"—expected it. Those expectations have been sharpened by films such as *Operation Red Sea* that portray the PLA ably conducting "military operations other than war" abroad. A decade or more hence, will those voices also demand that the PLA be able to wage wars beyond Asia or undertake highly complex nontraditional missions akin to the 2011 U.S. Navy SEALs raid that killed

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Clay and Roderick Lee, "Unmasking the Devil in the Chinese Details: A Study Note on the Science of Military Strategy 2020," China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 24, 2022, 6–7.

<sup>3</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, "Beyond Borders: PLA Command and Control of Overseas Operations," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, INSS Strategic Forum, no. 306, July 28, 2020.

Osama bin Laden? Or will China's censors be able to silence them and thus prevent the PLA from being boxed into roles that it might not be able to fulfill even then?

Based on the excellent research and analysis provided in this volume, one thing is certain: the PLA of tomorrow will not be thinking or doing the same things internationally that it is now. *Protecting China's Interests Overseas* offers a realistic way of explaining why change over time occurs, pointing us beyond the narrow prism of a rational actor model and encouraging us to think about the broader set of actors, ideas, and interests maneuvering for influence at the domestic level. For that, the book will be valuable far past the current waystation where the PLA finds itself today. 

## Protecting Chinese Interests Abroad or Planning for PRC Primacy?

*Andrew Scobell*

Andrea Ghiselli's meticulously researched and lucidly written tome, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, explores the drivers of China's increasing global military activism and is well worth the read. He has done exceptional research in primary Chinese language sources and solidly grounded his scholarship in the relevant international relations literature. The topic is one that has grabbed the attention of the United States and other countries—the growing global activism of the armed forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC). While still modest and tentative compared to the security activities and overseas military postures of other great powers, the 21st-century activities of China's armed forces go well beyond the PRC's borders and immediate periphery. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy now routinely transits the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Aden, and PLA Navy vessels regularly appear in more distant bodies of water. China joined the club of great powers that possess overseas military bases with its first official military facility beyond PRC borders formally established in Djibouti in 2017. And for twenty years the PLA has regularly conducted ground, air, and maritime exercises with other militaries in locales both within China and around the globe. China has also been dispatching soldiers to serve in UN peacekeeping missions far afield since the 1990s.

But China's increased military activism during the past decade or so signals a sea change in Beijing's disposition and thinking. China long proclaimed that it did not station a single soldier overseas or occupy an inch of foreign soil. But with a military base abroad, Beijing can no longer say this. What accounts for this dramatic change? The book describes the 2011 unraveling of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya as the watershed event. Beijing was caught by surprise and had to scramble to evacuate some 36,000 Chinese workers from the chaos (p. 1). The operation was coordinated by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs mostly using chartered commercial shipping via the Mediterranean to remove PRC citizens from harm's way. The involvement of the military in this operation was almost

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a sideshow—limited to four PLA Air Force Ilyushin Il-76s flying out 1,655 Chinese (p. 229) and a single PLA Navy vessel, the frigate *Xuzhou*, serving as an escort for an armada of civilian ships ferrying the evacuees out of Libya (pp. 223–24). According to Ghiselli, “a crisis in a third country had never impacted Chinese interests abroad as much as this one” (p. 1).

In an era where great-power competition is the dominant rubric and the myth of Chinese omnipotence seems pervasive in the policy community, two key findings of *Protecting China's Interests Overseas* merit special attention.

First, Ghiselli finds that China's greater security presence beyond its own immediate Asia-Pacific neighborhood is defensive—driven by a “powerful” impulse (p. 1) to protect its burgeoning interests overseas—rather than propelled by an offensive strategy to wrest global supremacy from the United States. The author concludes that the “deployment of Chinese soldiers in critical regions like the Middle East or North Africa...has not been motivated by a desire to erode American supremacy in those regions” (p. 241). Ghiselli's point is that not everything Beijing does is about great-power competition with Washington. Of course, the United States looms large for China's leaders and factors into almost every decision they make. But the PRC is pursuing its own destiny and advancing its own interests, not all of which involve the United States. A policy implication of this finding is that there is potential for cooperation, or at least coexistence, with the PRC on the global stage. However, China's “interest frontiers” are expanding and, when combined with Beijing's own zero-sum thinking, notwithstanding China's “win-win” propaganda rhetoric, there is no guarantee that this potential will be realized.

Second, Ghiselli's research reveals that most “events related to China's interest frontiers were hardly the result of a well-thought-out plan” (p. 242). This finding calls into question the pervasive myth of Chinese strategic genius and infallible farsightedness. Certainly, Xi Jinping and his fellow Politburo members are smart and extremely ambitious. Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tends to think in terms of grandiose multiyear masterplans, whether in the realms of economics, technology, or national defense. Yet these plans are not always well-conceived or successfully implemented. Over the course of more than seven decades, the CCP has presided over remarkable successes, but it has also experienced devastating failures.

Does Beijing have a brilliant “long game” to supplant the United States as the global hegemon? While this possibility cannot be completely

ruled out, Ghiselli's research suggests that this is unlikely. An alternate possibility is that Beijing does have a plan for global domination but is falling far short in execution. Of course, the absence of such a plan or the presence of discernible indicators of its poor execution does not preclude the possibility of China stumbling onto a trajectory of world domination. Indeed, China would not be the first great power to advance toward global preeminence through inadvertent incrementalism (leaving aside the question of ultimate success or failure). In other words, is the CCP pursuing primacy without a clear plan—just chasing a broad-brush dream of national greatness with ever-expanding interest frontiers as it plays perpetual catch up?

In the final analysis, if Beijing really does not have a plan, or if its implementation is as “tortuous” as Ghiselli finds China's efforts to protect its global interests (p. 242), then this suggests that Washington and Beijing might conceivably be able to manage their differences. Will the two great powers find a way to cooperate on areas of overlapping interest? The jury is still out, but *Protecting China's Interests Overseas* indicates that the potential is there. ♦



## Interests above Influence: China's Security Presence in the Middle East–North Africa Region

*Jonathan Fulton*

The deterioration of the U.S.-China relationship over the last decade has resulted in the increasing prevalence of a great-power competition framework of analysis for international politics, in which both countries have extensive interests that come to be seen as theaters of competition. The dynamic of this rivalry in the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region, where the United States is the dominant extraregional military power and China is the dominant economic one, has created an acute need for original scholarship to better understand how the region features in both countries' foreign policies. While the academic literature on U.S. foreign policy in MENA fills libraries, the work on China's foreign policy toward the region is at a nascent stage. Andrea Ghiselli's *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy* is an important contribution to the field.

One of the strengths of the book—and a limitation, as discussed below—is Ghiselli's decision to approach the topic as a question for foreign policy analysis rather than international relations. English-language work on China often begins with an assumption that Beijing is using its growing international power and influence in response to pressure from Washington; in MENA, however, this has not been the case. China has pursued an economics-centered approach that has largely sought to avoid antagonizing the United States, realizing that its regional interests have been best served within the existing U.S.-supported status quo. Ghiselli's study provides a rich empirical analysis of the domestic political and economic drivers of China's increasingly securitized approach to its regional interests. The book deeply engages with Chinese sources—official, academic, and media—effectively highlighting the plurality of Chinese voices in foreign policy, both toward MENA and in general. His point that “the vast majority of the events related to China's interest frontiers were hardly the result of a well-thought-out plan” (p. 242) is an insight that also deserves emphasis. Structural analysis of Chinese foreign policy in the Belt and Road era often assumes a grand strategy in which China is competing with other powers, such as the United States. However, the reality of the

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landscape in which state-owned enterprises, private companies, and regional consortiums map out their own regional strategies is inherently messier and complicates Chinese foreign policy decision-making, a point we all would do well to remember.

Chapter four, “The Problems of Knowledge in Policymaking,” is especially useful for those interested in China’s deepening footprint in MENA, which has often been juxtaposed with a perceived U.S. retrenchment from the region. This perspective frequently results in a narrative of China rising to the position of an emergent extraregional power. This chapter highlights some of the flaws in this belief, beginning with the issue of Chinese expertise of and knowledge production about MENA and focuses on both the “inner circle” of policymakers and the “outer circle” of media, academia, and think tanks (p. 115). Though there are excellent Chinese scholars and diplomats with deep and wide regional knowledge, at this stage it remains a rather small pool, which is understandable given the relatively short period that China has been meaningfully engaged in MENA. A considerable gap in quality and capacity exists between Chinese university programs and think tanks dedicated to Middle East studies and their counterparts in Europe and North America. Also, significantly smaller numbers of government officials have extensive personal and professional networks throughout the Middle East. The United States’ “forever wars” have resulted in senior U.S. officials over successive administrations possessing deep MENA knowledge, experience, and networks. China’s senior foreign policy officials, on the other hand, have largely been drawn from the ranks of North America and Asia specialists. For instance, Politburo member Yang Jiechi was ambassador to the United States and Foreign Minister Wang Yi was ambassador to Japan. In short, while China is developing a strong bench of talent within the West Asia–North Africa department of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>1</sup> its political presence has not kept pace with its economic one—a point that should be considered regarding China’s emergence in MENA.

The use of securitization theory is also useful, allowing for an analysis focusing on issues rather than countries. Ghiselli’s premise is that “if one looks at where major incidents involving the security of Chinese nationals and where the main ongoing Chinese military operations are taking place, it is clear that the geographical focus of the analysis must be the Middle East–North Africa” (p. 8). This point explains his case study selections of Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, each of which represents a major inflection point

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<sup>1</sup> China uses the term “West Asia” as the official designation of the region rather than “Middle East.”

in China's MENA presence despite their current marginal economic and political interests. Using this logic, one can anticipate how this securitized "interest frontier" in MENA can change given China's significant expatriate populations and commercial presence in the Arabian Peninsula or its interests in the Red Sea region. In the post-Arab Spring MENA, China has demonstrated an overwhelming preference for stable regional partnerships, with countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia receiving the lion's share of trade, investment, contracting, and political cooperation. Those countries' status as U.S. allies or partners—a source of risk management a decade ago—could present new challenges for China in an era of great-power competition, and a Chinese securitization logic toward the Persian Gulf is not an unreasonable outcome.

Insights from international relations theory are also required to understand China in MENA. Major systemic factors shape the options and preferences for decision-makers not only in Beijing but also in Washington and throughout the Middle East. China's interests in MENA started to grow significantly in a unipolar international system, and the U.S. regional security architecture had a profound effect on the trajectory of China's presence there. Ghiselli is correct to note that Beijing has been motivated by interests and opportunities rather than great-power logic: in MENA, China "has not been motivated by the desire to erode American supremacy" (p. 241). At the same time, a transition in the international order from unipolarity to multipolarity is changing the geopolitical landscape in MENA, including extraregional powers' policies. MENA leaders, no longer certain of U.S. commitments, have been hedging in several directions, including toward countries such as India and Japan that also consider China a significant threat. China's role as both an important external power in MENA and the primary rival of the United States and many U.S. allies and partners in and outside the region will be important in shaping dynamics to come. This is not to criticize Ghiselli for the book he did not write, but simply to highlight that there are many more books yet to be written about China's Middle East foreign policy, and many theoretical approaches will be needed to do the job.

The premise of this book is not especially novel, barring the belief in Chinese exceptionalism—that is, that China is not like other great powers. Indeed, Ghiselli makes this point in his own conclusion, stating that China "does not seem different from other great powers in history" (p. 247). China's increase of overseas assets and citizens has resulted in a foreign policy recalibration, and with it, the country has taken a more securitized

approach to MENA, a region where it has substantial interests. The path Ghiselli takes to explain how and why, however, makes the book a valuable study of Chinese foreign policy. At a time when much analysis is reduced to Xi Jinping's preferences or Thucydides's trap, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas* provides a thoughtful and well-researched examination of China in MENA. ◆

## Risk Management in China's "Going Out"

*Zongyuan Zoe Liu*

It has been almost 25 years since Chinese president Jiang Zemin first put forward "going out" as a critical development strategy in December 1997.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Beijing's "interest frontier" has expanded beyond the territorial border of the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>2</sup> In territories and markets where the Chinese Communist Party and state cannot command and reign, Chinese firms, investments, and human resources are all subject to much higher degrees of risk and uncertainty. Andrea Ghiselli's important book *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy* casts light on how the PRC's need to protect its overseas interests has gradually shaped and changed the foreign policy debate and foreign policy decision-making in China. The book addresses an important empirical puzzle: why has the PRC—a nation whose foreign policy has been centered on the principle of "noninterference in the internal affairs of others"—dispatched military forces to foreign territories and utilized both government and private security forces to safeguard Chinese nationals and properties overseas?

The answer to this question is more intricate than a simple attribution to the narrative of Xi Jinping's assertive leadership. Ghiselli's book provides a rich account of the various drivers and players involved in the protection of China's overseas interest frontier: the tendency of military and nonmilitary security instruments to follow economic activity; the explosion in the number of Chinese nationals living and working abroad; unpredicted and episodic crises, such as the need to suddenly evacuate about 36,000 imperiled PRC nationals from war-torn Libya in March 2011; and the interplay of domestic bureaucratic interests.

Ghiselli's analysis rests on scrutiny of China's fragmented policymaking process rather than treating the PRC party-state as a unitary actor. His treatment of China's "securitization" of its overseas interests does

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<sup>1</sup> Jiang Zemin, *Jiang Zemin wen yuan* [Selected Works of Jiang Zemin], vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Press, 2016), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ghiselli uses the phrase interest frontier to describe "the geographical space that is defined (and constantly redefined) by the evolution of China's interests and the threats to them" (p. 1).

not start from a hypothesized coherent Chinese grand strategy. The book captures both policymaking agencies at the top and policy implementors at the ground level and involves the dynamics among the vast array of different state-owned enterprises, government bureaucracies, various central policy coordinating bodies, and local administrations. The analysis also presents a nuanced take on the players in the securitization of China's overseas interests, such as the role of private security providers and that of state-owned export credit insurance providers.

There are at least three important contributions the book makes to understanding continuities and changes in China's foreign policy and the policymaking process. First, Ghiselli carefully documents the conceptual expansion of "national security" at China's top policymaking level. The book provides a thorough chronology regarding how "security" as a key concept has evolved and expanded in China's foreign policy since the era of Deng Xiaoping. In particular, Chinese leaders' embrace of "development interests" in foreign territories as a part of the PRC's national security has been the broader context that has allowed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) gradually to exhibit a higher degree of activism in foreign policy debates. The book also details China's institutional innovations, especially the legal and regulatory mechanisms that have shaped and been involved in implementing China's overseas interest protection activities.

Second, the book highlights the role of crises in accelerating changes in PRC foreign policy debates and decision-making. Ghiselli accurately identifies the 2011 Libyan crisis as a watershed moment for Chinese leadership, especially regarding the debate over the scope of "security." The crisis greatly exposed China's unpreparedness to address sudden and urgent security challenges overseas, policymakers' inability to obtain timely knowledge, and the fragmentation of China's bureaucracies. The crisis also spurred China's state-owned enterprises to demand the protection of the overseas interest frontier, pushing the party-state to prioritize defending these interests in its foreign policy calibration. This crisis-driven demand for the securitization of Chinese interests overseas has direct relevance for today and for future events. For example, the current Russia-Ukraine crisis challenges PRC overseas interests in Ukraine. The strategic importance of Ukraine has increased for Beijing as anti-Chinese sentiment grows across Europe, as witnessed by the European Parliament's vote to freeze the

ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment and Lithuania's exit from the China-led "17+1" mechanism in May 2021.<sup>3</sup>

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine presents new risks to Chinese companies who have large assets there or whose revenues are dependent on the involved countries. Chinese companies operating in Ukraine and Russia are dealing with different risks, requiring disparate risk-management measures from the party-state. Chinese firms in Ukraine face the immediate risk of war-inflicted damages to physical assets and human resources, as well as that of contract breaches. In contrast, Chinese companies doing business in Russia or working with Russian clients face growing pressure to exit the Russian market. Some of them also have concerns over secondary sanctions. The range of risks creates different demands for interest protection among Chinese corporations with stakes on opposite sides of the crisis. These differentiated corporate demands could further complicate China's already fragmented foreign policymaking process and prevent the party-state from formulating an immediate response. In this context, Ghiselli's analysis of how a crisis can reshape the PRC's foreign policy debate is directly applicable to understanding China's reaction to the current situation in Ukraine.

Third, Ghiselli pays great attention to people, including policymakers, policy shapers, and ordinary Chinese nationals. The book departs from a common approach to studying Chinese foreign policy that primarily concerns the role of leadership, bureaucracies, and the PLA in the making of the PRC's foreign policy. While acknowledging the importance of these policy elites, the book also examines the epistemic community, Chinese public opinion, and Chinese nationals who live and work in politically volatile regions overseas. Securing China's overseas interests is not just about securing national strategic interests or the physical assets of Chinese enterprises but also about securing the lives of Chinese people abroad. By addressing this level, the analysis demonstrates a high degree of scholarly concern and rigor.

A unique challenge China faces as an aspiring great power is negotiating with the incumbent great powers in the global system so that its interests overseas can have structural security. President Xi has pressed the issue of global governance reform and expressed the aspiration to build new types of major-power relations. The Chinese state has attempted to reform the existing international system by renegotiating its representation

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<sup>3</sup> "MEPs Refuse Any Agreement with China whilst Sanctions Are in Place," European Parliament, Press Release, May 20, 2021  <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04123/meps-refuse-any-agreement-with-china-whilst-sanctions-are-in-place>.

and voting rights in the existing system with the incumbent powers. China has also initiated new multilateral institutions to construct an alternative system and pressure changes from the outside. However, the book does not explicitly discuss the dynamics between the PRC and the existing U.S.-led global system, which could have been interesting to consider in how China navigates its overseas interest frontiers.

Ghiselli's analysis deals with the supply and demand for security provision in Chinese foreign policy at the macro level. He is correct that the party-state increasingly must deal with the same old problem that other great powers have faced—a rising demand to protect overseas national interests as a power's interest frontier expands globally. The book does not explicitly discuss the cost of not protecting the PRC's overseas interests and the importance of insurance and hedging. The cost of not protecting these interests, the security risk insurance premium, and the need for risk hedging may also shape the Chinese foreign policy debate. These factors all contribute to a higher "securitization premium" in the making and conducting of Chinese foreign policy.

Overall, in an era characterized by narratives of a "new Cold War" and major-power competition, Andrea Ghiselli's book provides a healthy reality check and some assurance. It provides a well-evidenced argument that the deployment of Chinese security forces in critical regions like the Middle East and North Africa has been motivated by the protection of national interests and citizens and not by the desire to undermine U.S. supremacy in these regions. Ghiselli's book opens up the black box of China's party-state and reminds us once again that China's foreign policymaking apparatuses, similar to those of the United States, are far from unitary. ◆



**Author's Response:**  
**Covid-19, Great-Power Competition, and the Future of  
China's Approach to the Protection of Its Interests Overseas**

*Andrea Ghiselli*

**I**t is difficult to find anything more rewarding for a scholar than to have leading experts in the field thoughtfully engage with their work. Thus, I am extremely thankful to the four reviewers for taking the time to do this with my book, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*. I must also thank *Asia Policy* for providing a venue for such a discussion to take place.

The four reviewers are well-known experts in Chinese foreign policy, each focusing on different issues. As such, I am happy that they all concur with the argument presented in my book and found it of interest. At the same time, they all touch upon similar issues in their comments, despite the different angles from which they discuss the book. In particular, they emphasize how I barely refer to the role of China's relations with other countries in the analysis. They also point out that I discuss the possible evolution of China's approach to the protection of its interests overseas, as well as implications for other actors in the international system, solely at the end of the book.

To a large extent, these were deliberate choices that I made for two reasons. The first, as Jonathan Fulton notes in his comments, was a focus on approaching the study of China's strategy to protect its interests overseas through the lens of foreign policy analysis rather than international relations. This approach means that I referred to other countries only to the extent that the Chinese authors I consulted as sources did so. The second is that I have always found making predictions a difficult endeavor. The critical role of contingency in the origin and evolution of China's strategy to protect its interests overseas convinced me of that even more. After all, I doubt that this book would have been written without the Libyan crisis in 2011. Against this backdrop, I am thankful to the reviewers for pushing me to elaborate more on the findings and implications of the analysis presented

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in my book, though I fear that addressing those issues has become even more difficult today.

One of the key factors that made China consider protection of its overseas interests was the steady expansion of its economic and human footprint abroad over the past decades. This trend may change, however, especially regarding the large presence of Chinese nationals abroad. According to the latest data released by the Chinese government, the number of Chinese infrastructure workers overseas declined from about 800,000 in 2019 to less than 500,000 at the end of 2020, likely because of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Of these workers, 163,000 were located in the Middle East and North Africa, about 100,000 less than in 2019. This is the biggest drop in the number of Chinese infrastructure workers abroad ever recorded both in those regions and at the global level. Notably, this figure does not include other categories of Chinese citizens overseas, such as entrepreneurs and students. Moreover, given that the number of workers in the Middle East and North Africa recovered quickly after the 2010–11 Arab Spring, a similar resurgence could happen again after the pandemic, but it should not be taken for granted. Chinese policymakers and scholars have also long known that foreign governments want Chinese projects to contribute to local employment and economic growth. As China's economic engagement with other countries continues to adapt, this pressure could lead to the reduction of China's human footprint overseas, especially in the developing world.

At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has caught up 6,000 Chinese nationals, makes the future even more uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Over the past decade, China managed to successfully evacuate thousands of people from countries such as Yemen, Iraq, and Ethiopia due to better preparation at the embassy level, improved cooperation with local governments, and—in Yemen—the option to use the military. Although Chinese nationals have continued to be victims of attacks amid conflict overseas over the years, these successes may have made Chinese policymakers confident about their approach. Today, while the crisis in Ukraine may not have any impact on the possible future uses of the Chinese military overseas, it demonstrates

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<sup>1</sup> National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo maoyi wai jing tongji nianjian* [China Trade and External Economic Statistical Yearbook] (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2021), 688–95.

<sup>2</sup> “Zhongguo zhu Wukelan shiguan: Zai Wu Zhongguo gongmin yue liuqian ren, muqian qingxu jiben wending” [Chinese Embassy in Ukraine: There are about 6,000 Chinese Citizens in Ukraine, the Situation Is Stable for the Moment], *Paper*, February 24, 2022 ≈ [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_16837420](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_16837420).

the shortcomings of the strategy developed in 2011. Given these issues, below are some tentative answers to the points raised by the reviewers.

Undoubtedly, China's relations with other countries are a crucial factor in its approach to the protection of its interests overseas, as the reviewers pointed out. I believe they play a constraining influence. As Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel noted in a recent article, China's military focus is on Asia and will stay there as long as Taiwan remains outside of Beijing's control.<sup>3</sup> The tensions between China and the United States will only contribute further to this situation. In general, China does not want its relations with other great powers to worsen because of crises involving its interests overseas. Both in Libya in 2011 and in Ukraine at the time of writing, military intervention by one or more great powers made an already unstable situation precipitate at a speed that caught China off guard. Yet, China's relations with the West did not deteriorate during the emergency in Libya, nor does it seem that its relations with Russia will today. At the same time, as Courtney Fung has argued, an important constituency of Chinese foreign policy is developing countries.<sup>4</sup> China's insistence on the principle of noninterference has garnered it support from developing countries over the years. One of the sources that I refer to in my book pointed out that allowing Chinese soldiers to use their firearms during peacekeeping missions is not a "simple" tactical issue (p. 190). Instead, the decision has important implications for Chinese diplomacy at large, both in terms of its future direction and its perception by other countries. Thus, China faces clear costs to expanding the role of the military in protecting its interests abroad beyond what it is today.

In the eyes of Chinese policymakers, these security and diplomatic concerns justify the payment of the "securitization premium," as Zongyuan Zoe Liu aptly describes in her review. At the same time, this interpretation is not inconsistent with Wuthnow's point that the Chinese military "is already taking several steps to prepare for combat-oriented tasks far away from China," including in "strategically important areas." After all, my book is about that fact that Chinese policymakers—both civilian and military—ultimately have come to agree that the armed forces should be ready to support efforts to protect Chinese nationals

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Military Strategy for a 'New Era': Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022) ~ <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2043850>.

<sup>4</sup> Courtney J. Fung, *Reconciling Status: China and Intervention at the UN Security Council* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

and assets overseas. Chinese policymakers want to be sure that they can rely on the military in case of an emergency while, at the same time, still limiting as much as possible the chance that they will actually need it. Chinese policymakers are trying to find a way to global prominence while also striving to avoid the trap of “inadvertent incrementalism,” as Andrew Scobell highlighted in his review.

Trying to behave as a rational unitary actor—that is, one that is capable of developing and executing a coherent strategy based on an accurate benefit-cost analysis—is crucial for China’s efforts to protect its interests overseas. This means overcoming the challenges created by both Chinese entities (such as companies that ignore warnings issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and foreign governments that hope to pull China into their own conflicts and rivalries.<sup>5</sup> Only time will tell if and to what extent China will succeed in doing this. ◆

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<sup>5</sup> See Andrea Ghiselli and Pippa Morgan, “A Turbulent Silk Road: China’s Vulnerable Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa,” *China Quarterly* 247 (2021): 641–61; and Andrea Ghiselli and Mohammed al-Sudairi, “Exploiting China’s Rise: Syria’s Strategic Narrative and China’s Participation in Middle Eastern Politics,” *Global Policy* (forthcoming).