

Zoltán VÖRÖS – Viktor ESZTERHAI:
China in a dilemma: On the brink of unilateral military interventions?¹

Executive Summary

- In recent decades, China has deliberately built its international presence on the principle of non-intervention, as well as the primacy of economic and trade relations, and has sought to define itself as a responsible great power.
- Chinese foreign policy practice, however, can no longer be interpreted as completely rigid non-intervention, as Beijing has increasingly participated in multilateral missions, evacuation operations, and global security commitments in recent years.
- The transforming world order, the relative weakening of rule-based institutions, and the transactional turn in Washington's foreign policy have created a new situation for China. In this environment, the limitations of the Chinese approach, which is based solely on economic and trade presence, are becoming increasingly apparent, especially when other actors make military capabilities part of the deal.
- The recent crises suggest that Beijing may be forced to take action if it wants to continue protecting its global economic, trade, and raw material interests.
- The main assertion of the analysis is not that China is necessarily preparing for unilateral military intervention, but that the credible demonstration of unilateral capabilities may become a strategic necessity for it in the future.

In recent decades, China has consistently sought to present itself as a responsible major power in the international arena, basing its foreign policy on the principle of non-intervention and the primacy of economic and trade relations. China's growing international interests, the relative weakening of rule-based international institutions, and the transformation of American foreign policy, however, are increasingly revealing the limitations of this approach. The analysis seeks to answer whether all this could force Beijing into a corner, and whether the previously avoided unilateral military solutions could become realistic options in Chinese strategic thinking in the near future.

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China emphasized the principles of sovereignty and non-interference even during the Cold War period; however, starting from the 1990s, this effort became increasingly conscious and consistent. From this period, China paid increased attention to shaping its international image and increasingly sought to position itself as a responsible great power in the international arena. This foreign policy self-definition was closely linked to the practice of Beijing refraining from unilateral military interventions and primarily relying on economic and diplomatic tools to strengthen its international presence.

To understand the historical background of this approach, it is necessary

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to look back at the last armed conflict fought independently by China. China's last war was the Third Indochina War of 1979, also known as the Sino-Vietnamese War. The Chinese troops crossed the border because Vietnam overthrew the China-backed Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia at the end of 1978, an event that Beijing viewed as a strategic threat. The war, which cost China dearly, lasted less than a month and taught them that the modernization of the mass army was essential. Following the "four modernizations"², the modernization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army began, a process that continues to this day. The decades-long process of transforming equipment, structure, and doctrinal approaches has also been accompanied by a significant increase in the military budget, making China the owner of the world's second-largest modern army budget, after the United States. All this, however, has resulted in an army that has not participated in an armed conflict in the past half-century.

Alongside military modernization, another equally significant process also unfolded. As a result of the reform and opening-up policy announced in 1978, China increasingly opened up to the world, which was accompanied by a deepening integration into the global economy. The growing global presence, however, also created new challenges. The demand for the protection of foreign economic, trade, and raw material interests has emerged, while China continued to rely primarily on economic and partnership networks.

This duality – the gradual strengthening of military capabilities and the increasing economic interdependence – has prompted Beijing over the past four decades to partially reinterpret the practical application of the principle of non-intervention. While preserving its principles and international image, this primarily manifested in participation in international operations, typically within a UN framework. These commitments can be interpreted as a form of "limited adaptation", which simultaneously served the modernization of the armed forces and the maintenance of a responsible great power image, while Beijing continued to avoid unilateral military actions.

However, the transforming international environment is increasingly testing this approach. Particularly the crisis of the rules-based world order, as well as the foreign policy of the United States under Donald Trump's second term, which boldly employs military tools, raise the question of how much all this might compel China to take action. This analysis argues that in the future, Beijing will be compelled to reconsider its restrained stance against unilateral interventions, and as a result, unilateral military solutions may also emerge in Chinese strategic thinking. Accordingly, the analysis first presents the principle of non-intervention and the international partnership policy of the People's Republic of China, then reviews the partial revision of this approach and its practical consequences, and finally identifies the external factors – particularly the transformation of the international order and American foreign policy – that increasingly compel Beijing to act. The conclusion points out that such a shift in foreign policy would not only involve strengthening the bargaining position and deterrence but could also steer China toward a more risky foreign policy path.³

² The Four Modernizations was a comprehensive reform program in post-Mao China, aiming for significant development in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology.

³ This analysis primarily focuses on the call for action generated by changes in global structures and the transformation of doctrinal approaches. Of course, the changes in military capacities are also relevant to the issue, but a detailed presentation of that exceeds the scope of this analysis.

2. The principle of non-interference and China's international cooperation policy

China viewed the UN peacekeeping activities as imperialist manipulation in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ This approach, stemming from the country's unique historical-geopolitical situation, also became a fundamental principle of its official foreign policy: the Chinese government rejected the idea that "certain countries interfere in the internal affairs of others, let alone armed intervention".⁵ Excluding the aforementioned war and since the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy, China has not launched any unilateral military intervention.

The so-called "principle of non-interference" is related to China's understanding of sovereignty, which is theoretically based on the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence'. This principle "was originally part of the preamble of the Sino-Indian Agreement signed in Beijing on April 29, 1954, and later [was] adopted by the Non-Aligned Movement"⁶. The five principles:

1. mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity,
2. mutual non-aggression,
3. mutual non-interference in internal affairs,
4. equality and mutual benefits,
5. peaceful coexistence.

The People's Republic of China's understanding of sovereignty, which many consider to be an "absolute sovereignty" approach⁷, therefore firmly rejects interference in the internal affairs of other states⁸ – moreover, many add that the country "strives to establish equal partnerships in its international relations, and therefore maintains good relations"⁹ even with opposing parties.

Alongside China's economic growth, Chinese interests have also appeared in regions far from the country, and within the framework of the "Going Global"/"Going Out" (Zouchuqu) program¹⁰, China has become a global player. The country's rise and growth, along with the protection of these interests, have begun to challenge the applicability of this historical approach.

From the perspective of protecting its interests, it posed a particular challenge that, in accordance with the principle of non-intervention, China consciously avoided the establishment of classic alliance systems and instead relied on flexible, primarily economically-based partnership networks. As a result, Beijing currently lacks a broad, institutionalized military alliance background: in formal terms, North Korea can be considered its only ally, which, however, contributes only limitedly to a global power projection capability. This 'alliance deficit' can pose a structural limitation, especially in regions far from China, where maintaining a military presence and asserting interests traditionally rely on alliance systems.¹¹

⁴ JORDÁN, Gyula: Kína szerepe az ENSZ békefenntartó tevékenységében [China's role in UN peacekeeping activities], *Nemzet és Biztonság* 4:8 (2011) 49-63.

⁵ SALÁT, Gergely: Kína Kapitány rendet tesz a nagyvilágban - A Harci farkas 2. és az új kínai önkép [Captain China Sets Order in the World - Wolf Warrior 2 and the New Chinese Self-Image], *Filmszem* 8:3 (2018) 20-41.

⁶ KRAJCSZÁR, Gyula: [Kína: érdek, identitás, globális stratégia](#) [China: interest, identity, global strategy], Doktori disszertáció, BCE, 2022. [online, 2026.03.01]

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ HORVÁTH, Levente – TÁRIK, Meszár: Kína és a Közel-Kelet gazdasági és kulturális együttműködése [The economic and cultural cooperation between China and the Middle East], *Külügyi Szemle* 22:3 (2023), 24-46.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Chinese government strategy since the early 2000s, which has supported and promoted the significant international engagement of Chinese companies.

¹¹ YAN, Xuetong: From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement. *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7:2 (2014), 153-184.

3. The Change in China's Approach – China as an Increasingly International Power

The principle advocated by China has also made the country's foreign policy approaches successful. The country arriving from the periphery has also reached the markets of developing states by opposing the former colonial and later imperialist approaches. China has begun to define itself as an increasingly responsible state¹², and the 'Responsible China' (Fu zeren daguo) narrative aims to present the East Asian state as a constructive global actor that respects the rules. The picture thus painted a picture of an actor working for international peace, one that does not wish to intervene in internal state processes out of respect for sovereignty – this perspective fit perfectly with that.

The sharp criticisms experienced in the 1950s and 1960s have quieted down, and since the 1990s, the country's reluctance toward international interventions has begun to ease.¹³ Over the past decade and a half, the debate surrounding the sustainability of the doctrine has intensified within the Chinese academic sphere. While more moderate reformers, such as Wang Yizhou, advocate for a more flexible, mediatory role through the concept of "creative involvement" (*chuangzaoxing canyu*),¹⁴ the prominent figure of the realist school, Yan Xuetong, argues that China must move beyond passivity and prioritize credible military deterrence, alongside the building of alliance systems, to maintain the strategic balance.¹⁵ In parallel, the concept of "consultative intervention" (*xianshangxing ganyu*) has emerged within Beijing-based think tanks, which seeks to theoretically reconcile actions taken with the host state's consent with the principle of respecting sovereignty.¹⁶

Beyond academic discourses, shifts are also occurring at the level of practical policy. It is worth highlighting four key areas and examples through which this practical shift is most tangible: one is the country's involvement in UN peacekeeping activities, another is the evacuation of its own citizens from conflict zones, the third is the naval operation against piracy in the Horn of Africa, and the last is the establishment of a naval military base outside of China's territory.

3.1. UN Engagement

China's current role in UN peacekeeping is the result of a decades-long shift in foreign policy. After taking Taiwan's place in the UN and the UN Security Council in 1971, Beijing pursued a policy of disengagement for many years, playing a moderate role in decision-making and not participating in the organization's peacekeeping missions. The role of being a bystander, however, began to be "narrow" for China as the country's interests grew, making it increasingly important to be able to defend and represent its economic, trade, and obviously related political interests to some extent.

All these demands have also overridden the skeptical approaches toward UN peacekeeping, and from the 1980s, but especially from the 1990s, it has been observed that Beijing has increasingly become an active participant and even a shaper of various UN missions and decisions, and has even changed its previously stated negative stance in the area of personnel contributions.¹⁷

¹² Interestingly, it was Robert Zoellick, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, who first spoke about China needing to become a responsible global player, back in 2005.

¹³ ZHENG, Chen: China Debates the Non-Interference Principle, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9:3 (2016), 349–374.

¹⁴ WANG, Yizhou: *Creative Involvement: The Evolution of China's Global Role*. London, Routledge, 2017.

¹⁵ YAN, Xuetong: *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

¹⁶ LI, Jason: [Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics: How China Justifies Its Non-Interference Policy](#). *Stimson Center Policy Brief*, 2019.08.27. [online, 2026.03.01]

¹⁷ CHEN, Jing: Explaining the Change in China's Attitude toward UN Peacekeeping: A Norm Change Perspective. *Journal of Contemporary China* 18:58 (2009), 157–73.

China first supported the extension of mandates, then agreed to finance operations, sent observers, and finally even military units to various UN missions¹⁸ – in other words, by now Beijing contributes to every action carried out under UN authorization, peacekeeping operation, and even supports the UN's global role.

China has become the most active and significant contributor among the permanent members of the UN Security Council to various UN peacekeeping missions, and although we will touch on other potential interests later, today the Chinese soldier is not an uncommon sight far from China – it should be added, however, that this is within the framework of the UN.

Table 1. Chinese personnel contribution to ongoing UN missions, 2026.

	Personnel contribution of China	Personnel contribution of the UK	Personnel contribution of France	Personnel contribution of Russia	Personnel contribution of the US	Total Personnel Contribution
MINUSCA	3	-	1	8	9	14979
UNMISS	874	4	-	15	7	11379
MONUSCO	13	3	1	10	-	9117
UNIFIL	472	2	650	-	-	7799
UNISFA	283	-	-	1	-	2851
UNDOF	-	-	-	-	-	948
UNFICYP	5	230	-	7	-	735
MINURSO	6	-	1	7	1	149
UNTSO	5	-	1	5	2	154
UNMOGIP	-	-	-	-	-	36
UNMIK	-	-	-	-	-	7
Total	1900	239	654	53	19	

Source: UN Peacekeeping¹⁹

3.2. Evacuation of Chinese citizens

Another area where the bending of the principle was observed. Previously, it could be clearly stated that "the traditional Chinese non-intervention policy does not allow for rushing to the aid of compatriots stranded at a distance with military or police units".²⁰ However, the approach has since evolved in this regard, and there have already been two instances where the navy actively participated in evacuating Chinese citizens from conflict zones:

- In 2011, the Chinese machinery, utilizing military capabilities, carried out its first but particularly significant evacuation operation, during which more than 35,000 people, mostly Chinese citizens (including Hong Kong and Macao citizens, as well as unspecified foreigners), were evacuated from Libya, the African country engulfed in violence, within 12 days.²¹

¹⁸ VÖRÖS, Zoltán – TARRÓSY, István: China as a peacekeeper: the case of MINURSO, *Journal of International Studies* 13:4 (2020) 143-154.

¹⁹ UN PEACEKEEPING: [Troop and police contributors](https://peacekeeping.un.org), *peacekeeping.un.org*, n.a. [online, 2026.03.01]

²⁰ KRAJCZÁR, 2022.

²¹ ZERBA, Shaio H: China's Libya Evacuation Operation: a new diplomatic imperative - overseas citizen protection, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23:90 (2014), 1093-1112.

- In 2015, 613 Chinese citizens were evacuated from Yemen with the help of the Linyi frigate from the port of Aden. The military operation is also memorable because, in addition to their own citizens, they evacuated 225 foreign nationals.²²

These military actions were "completely justified, and even the [...] Western press did not call them a unilateral intervention".²³

3.3. The Navy's Mission to Combat Piracy

Here we must also mention the naval missions started in the Horn of Africa, which were created in response to piracy. Although there is a mandate from the UN Security Council for a naval operation to secure the region's commercial routes, at the end of 2008, China decided to establish its own mission and did not join either the operational group coordinated by the Americans (Combined Task Force 151, CTF-151) or the structure created with the presence of the European Union (Operation Atalanta). Since then, Beijing has already sent the 48th rotation to the region²⁴, where they not only coordinate their involvement²⁵ with other international actors but also use the mission to create opportunities for carrying out military operations that fall below the threshold of open military intervention.

3.4. Naval base

A fourth element is the naval base established in Djibouti, which is the country's first and, to this day, only military base outside of China. The facility, inaugurated in 2017, followed the United States, France, Italy, and Japan in establishing such military complexes in the country near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. A base outside the country's borders, however, raises the question of how much the country can be considered a state that opposes interventions. Although the official Chinese justification states that the base was established for UN peacekeeping, anti-piracy operations, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief, the base is also specifically suitable for protecting economic interests related to trade relations with East Africa and Europe.²⁶

4. China and the Changing World Order

Alongside China's rise as a great power, the changing role of the international order and the United States is a crucial factor in the process through which the country is reevaluating its decades-old principles. The system that emerged after the end of the Cold War was interpretable for a long time as a unipolar structure based on the dominance of the United States.²⁷ The so-called 'unipolar moment' represented a historical phase that allowed China to integrate into the global economy. It required maintaining a conflict-averse, low-profile foreign policy strategy, which was easily reconcilable with Chinese foreign policy principles. China did not intervene in international conflicts because it did not need to. Foreign policy restraint has proven to be a strategically rational decision, and China has sought to assert its interests in a conflict-

²² BBC: [Yemen crisis: China evacuates citizens and foreigners from Aden](#), BBC, 2015.04.03. [online, 2026.03.01]

²³ SALÁT, 2018.

²⁴ CHEN, Yu-cheng: [Near-Seas Force Locking Reshapes Gulf of Aden Naval Missions](#), Jamestown, 2026.01.07. [online, 2026.03.01]

²⁵ KAMERLING, Susanne – VAN DER PUTTEN, Frans-Paul: An Overseas Naval Presence without Overseas Bases: China's Counter-piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40:4 (2011), 119-146.

²⁶ PINTÉR, Marcell György: [China's Military Base in Djibouti](#), KKI Policy Brief, 10 (2022). [online, 2026.03.01]

²⁷ IKENBERRY, G. John: *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

averse manner, in accordance with international rules.²⁸ It consciously avoided military solutions, acted in accordance with international rules and institutions, while establishing partnerships in its foreign policy. The hallmark of this era is China's narrative of 'peaceful rise' (heping jueqi)²⁹, which was precisely replaced with the interpretation of 'peaceful development' (heping fazhan) due to the potential negative connotations of the term rise.

However, following the 2008 economic crisis, the realignment of global resources toward the East became evident, which was accompanied by a weakening of the relative position of the United States and a decrease in its ability to ensure public goods.³⁰ In the changing world order, China continued to try to stabilize its environment and ensure its economic development through multilateral cooperation based on existing rules. The most striking manifestation of this is the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (*Yidai yilu*), which, with its economic focus, sought to avoid a direct challenger role. At the same time, it created economic dependencies in which China did not have to rely on military means.³¹

During Trump's first term, the USA, by violating the formal norms of global trade, initiated a trade war against China. This made Beijing realize that Washington is willing to violate international rules in order to stop China's growth and maintain the USA's leadership.³² In the second term of the Trump administration, Washington decided to regain control by partially abandoning institutions that stabilize the world order (for example, by withdrawing from the WHO) and by turning away from international norms (for example, by downsizing USAID and seizing Venezuelan tankers). Thus, its foreign policy presented a picture of great power empire-building: raw force, a transactional approach, and the delineation of spheres of influence became defining features.³³

In a post-hegemonic structure, however, the global institutional and normative frameworks are no longer able to stabilize the system to the same extent as before. The fragmentation of power, the intensification of regional conflicts, and the activity of rising great and middle powers indicate a transitional period. In this era, the old order has not yet completely disappeared, but the new power structure has not yet solidified either. Beijing's previous approach, based on multilateral and economic networks, no longer provides sufficient tools to assert global interests. For China, this creates a dilemma: while it continues to strive to maintain a conflict-averse image, it increasingly becomes necessary to actively shape its own security environment and, if necessary, support its economic presence with military means. At the same time, the changing structure also offers an opportunity: China can shape the rules and its environment in the emerging new world order in a way that allows it to assert its interests more effectively while maintaining its international image and global economic positions.

5. Military Actions of the Trump Administration and China's Constraints on Action

As presented in the previous point, China's growing interests, the continuous fragmentation of the international order, the weakening of rule-based multilateral frameworks, and power fragmentation together compel Beijing to reassess its previous conflict-averse foreign policy strategy. In this context,

²⁸ SHAMBAUGH, David: China Goes Global: The Partial Power. Oxford University Press, 2013.

²⁹ ZHENG, Bijian: China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status. *Foreign Affairs* 84:5 (2005). YAN, 2014.

³⁰ LAYNE, Christopher: The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment. *International Security* 31:2 (2006), 7-41.

³¹ ESZTERHAI, Viktor: The Geopolitical Strategy of China: The Belt and Road Initiative as a Geoeconomic Umbrella. In Nuno Morgado (ed.), *Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century: Territories, Identities, and Foreign Policies*, Nova Science Publishers, 2021, 57-84.

³² PATRICK, Stewart M.: Trump and World Order: The Return of Self-Help. *Foreign Affairs* 96:52 (2017).

³³ CSIZMAZIA, Gábor – ESZTERHAI, Viktor – TÁRNOK, Balázs: [The Impact of Trump 2.0 on Europe's Position in the Transforming World Order](#). John Lukacs, *Analyses on Global Affairs*, 1 (2025). [online, 2026.03.11]

Donald Trump's military actions between 2025 and 2026 in Venezuela, Yemen, and Iran emerged, clearly demonstrating the United States' capability and willingness to actively intervene in global conflicts. Although controversial in the eyes of the international community, in practice they addressed the dilemmas faced by China: the use of military tools has become a decisive factor in asserting global interests in a world where previous rules no longer guaranty stability.³⁴ In this context, it is not surprising that Zheng Yongnian, one of the most influential thinkers of the Beijing elite, proposes a new guideline termed "Non-Interference 2.0" (bu guanyuzhuyi 2.0 ban). Within this framework, he introduces the concept of "positive intervention" (zhengmian ganyu), which defines three concrete, critical scenarios in which China must abandon its passivity and where open intervention becomes inevitable:

- When China's overseas interests are violated by the host country: This is particularly relevant in partner nations within the developing world that fall into domestic political instability and violence, or where a sudden regime change leads the new leadership to unilaterally breach agreements signed with China.
- When China's overseas interests are violated by a third country: This occurs when the unilateral actions of an external great power (such as naval blockades, sanctions, or armed strikes) indirectly dismantle Chinese investments and supply chains.
- When external factors directly threaten China's domestic security and interests: This category includes transborder threats such as foreign-backed separatism, terrorism, or transnational criminal organizations targeting Chinese citizens overseas.

According to Zheng, this approach draws a sharp line between the "bandit-style" interventions practiced by the United States (such as enforcing regime change or instigating internal rebellions) and Chinese "constructive engagement" (jianshexing canyu).³⁵ However, this principled distinction between Beijing and Washington is highly debatable in practice.³⁶

In the short and medium term, American interventions did not harm China's direct economic or strategic interests; on the contrary, they may have even helped the country's international reputation due to its non-intervention stance. However, in the long term, the question may arise for both China and its partners: how long can the state be maintained in which China is unable to protect its economic, trade, and political interests in partner countries? It is also possible that some actors will be interested in cooperating with those who can militarily protect or support them. Above all, its reputation in the Global South may be at risk: despite being peaceful and rule-abiding, the 'Responsible China' narrative is less appealing to those states seeking protection in a chaotic, fragmented world. China's traditional, multilateral, and economic-centered approach is simply no longer sufficient when great powers like the USA or Russia and certain middle powers are playing a different game. Beijing has been unable to defend its strategic partners in critical situations, whereas American interventions have been swift, purposeful, and mostly effective, literally "kicking down the door" to the international community. Beijing's risk-averse

³⁴ VÖRÖS, Zoltán – TARRÓSY, István: [The Washington-mediated Congo-Rwanda Agreement: Conflict Resolution in a Changing World Order](#), *Analyses on Global Affairs*, 2025/8. [online, 2026.03.06]; VÉKONY, Dániel: [Renewed U.S. interventionism and China](#), *Geo-Polemic*, 2026.03.06. [online, 2026.03.06]

³⁵ ZHENG, Yongnian: [Duihua Zheng Yongnian: Conglin shijie, Zhongguo pojie xuyao "bu guanyuzhuyi 2.0 ban"](#) [Dialogue with Zheng Yongnian: In a Jungle World, China Urgently Needs "Non-Interference 2.0"]. *Dialogue*, March 9, 2026. [online, March 11, 2026]

³⁶ The typology and comparison formulated by Zheng require nuance from several perspectives. On the one hand, the rational, security, or stability categories mentioned in relation to China also appear in US foreign policy doctrines and justifications (whether regarding involvement in Iran, Yemen, or Ukraine); that is, Washington seeks geopolitical and legal legitimacy just as other great powers do (including Beijing). On the other hand, the "bandit-style" or regime-change interventions criticized by Zheng are primarily linked to the democracy-export agenda (the neoconservative foreign policy of the Bush administration and the period of the Arab Spring), which have come to be viewed extremely negatively even in US domestic politics, largely fueling today's American isolationist tendencies.

behavior increasingly undermines its ambition to shape its environment for its own internal development; due to Washington's foreign policy, a clear imperative for action has emerged for China.³⁷ If Beijing does not want to fall behind, it will have to support its global presence with military means and, if necessary, demonstrate its strength through unilateral interventions.

6. Conclusion

The transforming international order, the weakening of institutional frameworks, and power fragmentation are forcing Beijing to reassess the previously peaceful and conflict-averse principles of Chinese foreign policy. Although the People's Liberation Army has gained internationally accepted operational experience through multilateral and UN missions over the past decades, a strategy relying solely on economic and diplomatic tools is increasingly proving insufficient. The intensifying great-power rivalry and expert discourses both indicate that actively considering the military dimension is becoming inevitable for Beijing to safeguard its global interests. A more active demonstration of military capabilities and a more proactive presence could yield the following potential benefits for Beijing:

- Increasing deterrence credibility, which directly strengthens the bargaining position.
- The improvement of the negotiating position against global major and middle powers.
- Ensuring access to resources, especially in strategically important regions.
- Strengthening global status, which can also be supported by the demonstration of military capabilities.

In parallel, a more assertive foreign policy course that also relies on military instruments carries serious systemic risks:

- Image loss: the damage to the "Responsible Power" narrative reduces China's peaceful, rule-following image – which poses a risk primarily from the perspective of the EU and other middle powers.
- Strengthening of counter-coalitions: the USA and its partners may intensify countermeasures, citing China's open actions.
- Economic reprisals: Although risks may arise in the case of sanctions and trade pressure, Beijing has deliberately built its resilience over the past decades.
- Conflict escalation: military actions can easily trigger a chain reaction.

The Chinese political and military elite almost certainly clearly perceive the benefits and severe risks associated with a more proactive engagement; for now, decision-making remains characterized by a wait-and-see approach, even as Beijing slowly expands its room for maneuver. At the same time, rapid changes in the international environment – such as great-power unilateralism, the escalation of local conflicts, and direct challenges confronting China – could easily force the leadership in Beijing into a corner, accelerating this deliberation process toward a more active utilization of the military dimension. Such a foreign policy would be far riskier, as it could have a more direct impact on society, the long-term modernization goals of the Chinese Communist Party, and the country's international image. At the same time, based on geopolitical realities, the consideration of military tools is becoming increasingly unavoidable. If China wishes to maintain its global weight, influence, and bargaining position, from a strategic perspective, it cannot avoid actively managing the military dimension.

³⁷ For its theoretical problems, see: MEARSHEIMER, John J.: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated Edition, W. W. Norton, 2014.; FRIEDBERG, Aaron L.: *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* W. W. Norton, 2018.



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