

Thou Shalt Not Interfere in Internal Affairs: China’s Foreign Policy Rhetoric

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Introduction

“The principle of non-interference in internal affairs is the ‘magic tool’ for developing countries to safeguard their sovereignty and security. We appreciate those countries for their understanding and support for China’s position.”

- Facebook post by the Chinese Embassy in Nepal (in English) (noa 2022)

In 1954, China introduced the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, initially as a framework for relations with India which then evolved into a staple of Chinese foreign policy that has lasted for decades. Among them, the principle of strict non-interference is a source of great interest in both policy and scholarly analyses, to the point that official rhetoric insisting that other states stop “interfering in China’s internal affairs” has become a cliché.

While existing studies have primarily focused on Chinese *policy* of non-interference,¹ including whether and how China lives up to its own strict standards (Sørensen 2019), this study takes as its focal point the rhetoric of non-interference itself. By analyzing when and

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¹See, for example: (Gonzalez-Vicente 2015; Zheng 2016; Hirono et al. 2019; Gazibo and Lema 2022).

how China deploys this narrative, as well as when they choose *not* to use this rhetoric, we argue that the way China “sells” its version of non-interference abroad is not static; rather, it varies both in amount and kind. Using a mixed-method analysis of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ public press conferences from 2012-2022, we find that the way China talks about non-interference has changed over time, broadening to become an articulation of a more universal narrative of sovereignty in opposition to established liberal internationalist norms. We find that since 2018, as the United States increasingly steps back from its leadership role in the international system, China has begun to articulate its vision of a new – or perhaps very old – version of sovereignty norms, deliberately targeting partner states with narratives designed to bring them into this vision of statehood based on strict non-interference.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we add to the literature on Chinese revisionism, which has begun to recognize different forms of “soft” revisionism. In particular, Johnston frames liberal international order as order(S), with China’s position varying across different issue areas. We take up this mantle, by discussing China’s evolving posture toward one particularly important order-based norm – sovereignty. Second, we contribute to the literature on norms, especially norm entrepreneurship, by continuing the more recent thread of study of norm entrepreneurship outside of so-called “universal” or liberalizing (Western) norms pushed by normatively moral non-state actors (Glasius et al. 2020; Bettiza and Lewis 2020; Flonk 2021). Specifically, there is very little extant work on Chinese norm entrepreneurship, a mantle we take up in this paper. Finally, we make an empirical contribution by showing systematically how a phrase that is so common in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric that it has become almost a cliché is used as part of a broader narrative strategy.

In the following sections, we first briefly discuss the literature on narratives around sovereignty as well as Chinese rhetoric, before laying out our theory of emerging Chinese norm entrepreneurship on the issue of non-interference. We then turn to our empirical analysis of ten years of Chinese rhetoric, using structured topic modeling to illuminate pat-

terns in Chinese rhetoric both across topics and over time. We then analyze these patterns qualitatively to show how China is no longer passively accusing other states of interfering, but instead developing narratives around non-interference that are increasingly aimed at “selling” their vision of sovereignty to other states, especially those already excluded from enjoying the benefits of the liberal international system. We conclude with limitations and avenues for future research.

Chinese Foreign Policy and Sovereignty Rhetoric

In Philpott’s seminal 2001 work on sovereignty and its iterations, the author illuminates how the state system came to define sovereignty through two major revolutions – first Westphalia in the 17th century, then the decolonization process in the 20th (Philpott 2001). For Philpott, changing norms of sovereignty were brought about not purely because of rises and falls of great powers or shifts in power and authority, but because of revolutions of ideas, particularly ideas about who gets to be included in the concept of a state and what the limitations of sovereignty are. Although he is primarily interested in the role of religion in these revolutions, the parallels to today are uncanny:

“Not only did both sets of revolutionaries claim sovereignty, but both also claimed sovereignty in a similar moral fashion, on behalf of a similar value — freedom. At least freedom of a certain sort. Both revolutions sought sovereign authority as protection for a people, for their local prerogatives, for their immunities, for their autonomy, all of this as a shield from the impositions of a more universal entity, in both cases an empire — Holy Roman, Catholic, British, French. In the languages, tropes, and imagery of both sets of revolutionaries lie the theme of liberation...In both revolutions, then, sovereignty procured freedom in this limited, but important, sense: the holder of sovereignty was immune from rival claims to authority from both within and without its territory” (Philpott 2001

p. 254).

In fact, Chinese President Xi Jinping explicitly made reference to Westphalia in a January 2017 speech at the United Nations in Geneva:

“As modern history shows, to establish a fair and equitable international order is the goal mankind has always striven for. From the principles of equality and sovereignty established in the Peace of Westphalia over 360 years ago to international humanitarianism affirmed in the Geneva Convention 150-plus years ago; from the four purposes and seven principles enshrined in the UN Charter more than 70 years ago to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence championed by the Bandung Conference over 60 years ago, many principles have emerged in the evolution of international relations and become widely accepted. These principles should guide us in building a community of shared future for mankind” (noa 2017).

Although he did not coin the term, President Xi adopted the concept of “discourse power” from the beginning of his time in office. Indeed, discourse power became an explicit strategy when at a 2013 National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference: Xi articulated his vision of “striv[ing] to move international communications capacity construction forward, innovate foreign propaganda methods, strengthen discourse system construction, strive to forge new concepts, new categories and new expressions that circulate between China and the outside world, tell China’s story well, disseminate China’s voice well, and strengthen our discourse power internationally” (noa 2013). In these efforts, he specifically aimed these efforts at “resolving with great efforts” the Western monopoly on international public opinion.

In the broader literature on shifting Chinese approaches to the international order, especially since Xi took office, scholars have grappled the question of whether – and how – China positions itself as a revisionist state. Indeed, “in contrast with China’s emphasis through

2008 on simply joining and adapting to the existing international order, under Xi, Beijing has pushed for its reform,” (Goldstein 2020, 182).

Complicating this question of Chinese revisionism and international order, Johnston (2019) suggests at least 8 different “orders” that scholars can analyze. We focus on analyzing how China’s approach to order as it relates to sovereignty, arguing that it has shifted, although not necessarily in the sense of being truly revisionist but rather in trying to change from within or actually maintain a more “strict” vision of sovereignty norms.

Goh (2019) takes a different approach, looking at the problem from an English School lens of socially constituted international order, but she comes to a similar conclusion. Rather than aiming to challenge the fundamental, underlying bargains that make up the world order, China is instead aiming to work within existing compacts to alter the specific rules of engagement (see p. 635 and 641). This is not a project China is embarking on alone; indeed, “China’s major challenge now is to gain support from other states” (641).

Scholars point to 2017 as a particular turning point in China’s approach toward the international system, specifically referring to Xi’s speech at the Davos Forum as a new, broader articulation of Chinese ambitions, particularly in the economic realm: “we should develop a model of fair and equitable governance in keeping with the trend of the times. As the Chinese saying goes, people with petty shrewdness attend to trivial matters, while people with vision attend to governance of institutions. There is a growing call from the international community for reforming the global economic governance system, which is a pressing task for us” (Xinhua 2017).

Just one day later, Xi more explicitly linked this push for institutional governance to the conceptualization of sovereignty, and, notably, interference:

“Sovereign equality is the most important norm governing state-to-state relations over the past centuries and the cardinal principle observed by the United Nations and all other international organizations. The essence of sovereign equality is that the sovereignty and dignity of all countries, whether big or small, strong or weak,

rich or poor, must be respected, their internal affairs allow no interference and they have the right to independently choose their social system and development path. In organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Meteorological Organization, International Telecommunication Union, Universal Postal Union, International Organization for Migration and International Labor Organization, countries have an equal voice in decision-making, constituting an important force for improving global governance. In a new era, we should uphold sovereign equality and work for equality in right, opportunity and rules for all countries” (noa 2017).

In the next section, we further develop our theory as to why and how China has shifted its rhetoric toward non-interference norms, especially at this particular moment of contestation in the liberal international order.

Theory and Hypotheses

In this paper, we argue that China’s non-interference principle presents an alternative to the current norms of sovereignty, a web of rules led broadly by the United States and its allies since the end of World War II. In short, we theorize that since 2017 China has broadened its use of the phrase ”non-interference in internal affairs” in its public statements as a rhetorical device through which it seeks to cultivate support among like-minded states in the international arena.

We theorize that China is acting as a norm entrepreneur, using its rhetoric to gather support for a re-conceptualization of sovereignty based on a more strict definition of non-interference. As such, we trace how China has discussed non-interference in its public rhetoric through the specific phrase “Do not interfere with our internal (domestic) affairs.”

The literature on norm life cycles argues that timing is key - there has to be an actor

with both the will and capacity in order to even start pushing for a new norm or redefinition of an existing norm. We argue that 2017 represents exactly this kind of opportunity, one that China has seized upon. The first election of President Donald Trump is relevant here - with the US stepping back from leadership in international institutions, especially ones that China particularly cares about (i.e. the UNSC), there has been an opening for China to step up and put forward its vision for international order (Goh 2019; Goldstein 2020). Indeed, this coincided with President Xi's turn toward a more international vision of his foreign policy; with the abolition of term limits in 2018, Xi began looking at his foreign policy goals in a much broader and more long-term perspective. Against this backdrop, he launched a narrative campaign aimed at (re)defining sovereignty norms, and actively gathering other states behind the cause.

If we are right that 2017 marked a turning point when China began actively “selling” its (re)conceptualization of sovereignty as a broader norm, we should see a clear change in China's use of language about sovereignty norms over time, shifting from a focus purely on its own domestic concerns and territorial issues, to making a broader, more proactive case for its definition of sovereignty. In addition, we should see the “new” use of the target phrase as directly challenging the US and the US-led international order as hypocritical and counter to the proper, moral application of the norm (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Indeed, if we are right that this is a case of Chinese norm entrepreneurship, not an attempt to execute a full systematic revision, we should see China making moral arguments, or identity-based arguments (see p. 902), as opposed to functionalist or power transition arguments, for why other states should follow the Chinese version of “non-interference” policy. As such, we put forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. After accounting for the main topic of a question, China's use of the target phrase “do not interfere in our internal affairs” will vary based on which state is doing the alleged interference. Specifically, when Western democracies are mentioned, the proba-

bility of China adopting the phrase increases.

Hypothesis 2. Over time, China will increasingly shift from primarily using the target phrase to defend its own territorial concerns to using it more broadly for other states and issue areas.

Hypothesis 2-1. Specifically, the phrase is used to protect partners' internal affairs against Western interference.

Data and Measurement

Our empirical analysis uses the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Conference Corpus data (CMFA) from [Mochtak and Turcsanyi \(2021\)](#). This dataset contains the corpus of regular press conferences held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). We do acknowledge the possibility that the English publication of minutes may not fully reflect the actual conversations held during the conferences, as the MFA may have omitted certain question-answer pairs or modified the wording afterwards. More fundamentally, the MFA likely controls who can attend the conferences, who receives the opportunity to ask questions, and which topics are addressed. Nevertheless, precisely for those reasons, we posit that this dataset best represents the official standpoint of China. The assumption here is that if the MFA manipulated anything, it did so to ensure the final record aligns with the state's curated strategic narratives and official policy positions. Moreover, because our research focuses on how China adopts the phrase in the context of foreign and international relations, we believe that English-written minutes are targeted for foreign audiences and therefore provide an appropriate data source.

The unit of analysis is a question-answer dyad, where journalists ask questions and the MFA answers (Table 1). The number of conferences nearly doubled in the very first year—from 75 in 2012 to 139 in 2013—before stabilizing in the 200s from 2016 onward. The volume

of Q&A pairs grew even more steeply, rising almost sixfold from 467 in 2012 to a peak of 2,892 in 2021.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Press Conferences (2012–2022)

Year	N of Conferences	Total Q&A Pairs	Answers w/ Key Phrases ^a	Key-Phrase Variant ^b	
				First	Second
2012	75	467	3 (0.64%)	3	0
2013	139	811	6 (0.74%)	6	0
2014	167	954	36 (3.77%)	33	3
2015	199	1,106	33 (2.98%)	27	7
2016	206	1,578	30 (1.90%)	26	4
2017	223	2,031	41 (2.02%)	35	7
2018	225	1,791	51 (2.85%)	48	6
2019	220	2,104	167 (7.94%)	149	19
2020	242	2,836	259 (9.13%)	228	31
2021	229	2,892	357 (12.34%)	284	87
2022	237	2,561	238 (9.29%)	171	90
Total	2,162	19,131	1,221 (6.40%)	1,010	254

^a Parenthetical values report the share (%) of all answers in that year that contain a key phrase.

^b The First- and Second-variant columns show how many key-phrase answers use each variant, decomposing the “Answers w/ Key Phrases” count. They are *not* mutually exclusive: 42 answers use both variants.

The outcome of interest is whether China adopts the key phrase, “Do not interfere in internal (domestic) affairs,” in their answers. To code this dependent variable, we manually read all the questions and answers that contain the keywords “interfer(ence)” and “internal” to identify the instances where they indeed meant sovereignty. The adoption of the phrase shows a noticeable growth over the years (Table 1). After fluctuating between 0.64 and 3.77 percent of answers through 2018, its share jumped to 7.94 percent in 2019—nearly triple the previous year’s level—and then climbed to a decade-high 12.34 percent in 2021. In absolute terms, the post-2018 years alone account for the overwhelming majority of the answers with the phrase. This may not be a coincidence, as 2018 is the year when Xi started his second term and amended the constitution to remove the presidential term limit.

We further distinguish the dependent variable into two variants. The first variant is when China tells other countries not to interfere with its own internal affairs. For instance,

when China tells the US not that Taiwan issues are part of its internal affairs that “brook no interference,” DV1 is coded as 1. The second variant is when China adopts this phrase as a general principle that all countries must uphold, or when China tells Country A not to interfere in Country B’s internal affairs, even when the issue at hand does not involve China. For instance, DV2 is coded 1 when in 2015, China said it “hope(s) that Venezuela-US relations” are handled “on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in domestic affairs.” We believe that this variant demonstrates China’s willingness to take a more active role in meddling in others’ foreign relations with its own standards, thus worth paying attention to separately. As summarized in Table 1, the FMA started to adopt the second variant more often only since 2019, followed by another surge in 2021.

In the first empirical analysis, we examine whether China is more likely to adopt the phrase in response to Western democracies. Hence, the main independent variable is whether any Western democracies are mentioned in the question. To generate this indicator, we first extract the entirety of all countries and entities mentioned in questions. When the names of the capital city, president, and diplomat are mentioned, their corresponding countries are coded. This renders over 60 unique entity names, which are then classified into five categories: Western democracies, or the followers of the US-led international order; China partners; hedging states; regions with territorial issues; and multilateral organizations. Table 2 presents the entity list and their classifications.

In the Appendix, we further present the number of mentions for each entity. Notably, Western entities are mentioned in 65 percent of all questions, with the U.S. taking up about half of them (32.1 percent), followed by Japan (8.5 percent) and South Korea (4.4 percent). Accordingly, later in certain model specifications, we exclude the U.S. from the Western democracy block for robustness checks. China partners are mentioned in 25 percent of all questions, with the DPRK and Russia appearing in 6.6 percent each. Entities with relevant territorial disputes are mentioned in 16.7 percent of questions, with Taiwan being the most frequently mentioned (4.9 percent).

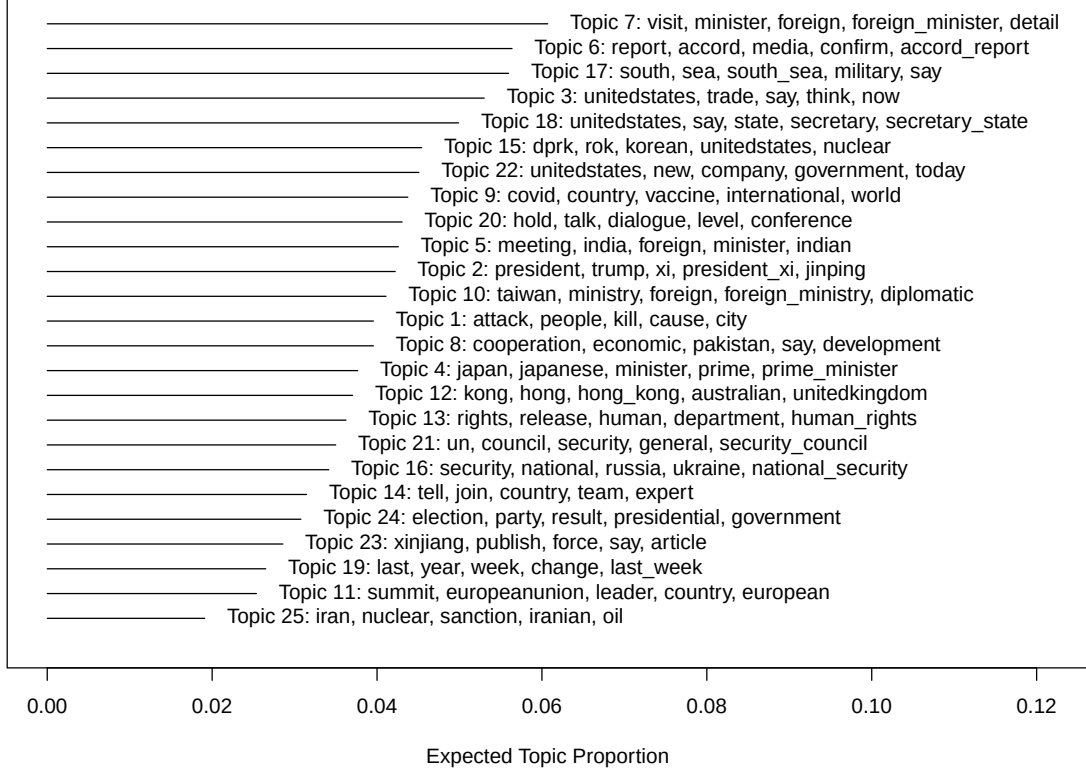
Table 2: Entity classification by geopolitical bloc.

Category	Entities
Western democracies	US; UK; EU; Germany; France; Australia; Canada; Japan; Netherlands; Sweden; Norway; Denmark; Belgium; Switzerland; New Zealand; South Korea; Czech; Lithuania; Estonia; Latvia; Poland; Finland; Italy; Spain; Portugal; Ireland; Iceland; Luxembourg; Austria; Romania; Bulgaria; Croatia; Slovenia; Western Countries; G7; NATO; Five Eyes; EU body; Greece; Hungary; Slovakia; Israel
China partner	Russia; DPRK; Iran; Syria; Venezuela; Cuba; Zimbabwe; Belarus; Pakistan; Cambodia; Laos; SCO; Ethiopia; Sudan; Eritrea; Nicaragua; Bolivia; Myanmar; Serbia; Algeria; Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Kyrgyzstan; Libya; South Sudan; Solomon Islands
Hedging	India; Turkey; Brazil; South Africa; Mexico; Indonesia; Malaysia; Vietnam; Philippines; Singapore; UAE; Saudi Arabia; Ukraine; Thailand; Egypt; Nigeria; Kenya; Argentina; Colombia; Qatar; Iraq; Afghanistan; Sri Lanka; Maldives; Nepal; Bhutan; Mongolia; Fiji; Botswana; Panama; El Salvador; Catalonia; Yemen; Somalia; Bahrain; Kuwait; Oman; Jordan; Lebanon; Morocco; Tunisia; Chile; Peru; Ecuador; Bangladesh; Tanzania; Guinea; Papua New Guinea
Territory	Hong Kong; Taiwan; Tibet; Xinjiang; South China Sea; East China Sea
Multilateral	UN; UNSC; G20; ASEAN; ICC; WTO; WHO; UNHRC; IOC; BRICS; OAS; IMF

Note: All Western democracies mentioned in the question are included. Entities are classified when they carry a recognizable alignment or salience in US–China contestation (e.g., SCO/BRI members, recognition-switch cases). Small or neutral states with no such role, all of which are non-Western, are omitted; examples include Nauru, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Palau, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, Barbados, Grenada, Dominica, Jamaica, Belize, Gambia, Lesotho, Comoros, Eswatini, and Togo.

The empirical analysis includes the variable that captures whether the questions mention territorial keywords: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea (Table 2). This is to examine whether the effect of Western democracies survives after accounting for the topic effect. We further control for the overall topics, generated by running a structural topic model (STM) on the questions. The STM results suggest that the questions are comprised of 25 latent topics, with their proportions and keywords shown in Figure 1. In the quantitative analysis, Topic 17 on the South China Sea, Topic 10 on Taiwan, Topic 12 on Hong Kong, and Topic 23 on Xinjiang are dropped along with the baseline Topic 19. Other than these topics, journalists tend to ask questions regarding the foreign minister’s visits, media reports, as well as the issues related to the US, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula. Finally, year and spokesperson fixed effects are included.

Figure 1: Topic Prevalence in Questions



Note: The STM analysis on questions reveals 25 latent topics. The plot shows the five keywords associated with each topic and their expected proportions in the dataset.

Western Democracies Drive the Phrase

The first hypothesis posits that after accounting for territorial topics, mentioning Western democracies in the question increases the probability of China adopting the non-interference phrase. To test this hypothesis, we let $Y_i = 1$ if the answer to question i adopts the non-interference phrase (i.e., $DV1_i = 1$ or $DV2_i = 1$), and 0 otherwise.

$$\text{logit}(\Pr(Y_i = 1)) = \log \frac{\Pr(Y_i = 1)}{1 - \Pr(Y_i = 1)} = \eta_i, \quad (1)$$

Then, we run the following two models:

$$\eta_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Territorial}_i + \beta_2 \text{Western}_i + \sum_{k \in \mathcal{K}} \gamma_k \theta_{ik} + \delta_t, \quad (2)$$

$$\eta_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Territorial}_i + \beta_2 \text{Western}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Territorial}_i \times \text{Western}_i) + \sum_{k \in \mathcal{K}} \gamma_k \theta_{ik} + \delta_t, \quad (3)$$

where Territorial_i and Western_i are indicators for whether the question mentions a territorial issue and/or a Western democracy (keyword-based). θ_{ik} is the STM proportion of topic k in question i , where $\mathcal{K} = \{1, \dots, 20\}$. δ_t denotes year fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered by date. We are interested in examining whether β_2 is positive and statistically significant in Equation (2). In addition, the interaction coefficient β_3 in Equation (3) tests whether the association between territorial questions and non-interference rhetoric is the strongest when a Western democracy is mentioned in the questions.

Table 3 summarizes the logistic regression results. Overall, they reveal two findings: First, as the conventional wisdom suggests, territorial issues indeed make China adopt the non-interference phrase. Models (1) and (3) show that raising territorial issues in the question multiplies the odds of the phrase in the answer by roughly 7.13-7.5 ($e^{1.965}$ and $e^{2.015}$). Yet, note that the topics on Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang drive such results, while those on the South and East China Sea alone instead decrease the probability of the phrase (Appendix). This suggests that the non-interference phrase is primarily used to defend “domestic” sovereignty issues, while it is less likely to be used for territorial disputes with a third country.

Second, even after accounting for the territorial issues, Western democracies still increase the probability of adopting the phrase, as our first hypothesis predicts. In Models (2) and (3), naming a Western democracy in the question multiplies the odds of the phrase by 2.88-3.06 ($e^{1.057}$ and $e^{1.117}$). Importantly, Model (3) suggests that the identity of the interfering country matters independently: when both indicators are included in the model

together, their coefficients remain large and highly significant. This result is not entirely driven by the US, as the non-US Western democracies remain positive and significant in Model (4). Understandably, because half of the questions mentioning the West refer to the US, the magnitude declines from 1.057 to 0.57. Model (5) demonstrates that the influence of mentioning certain actors is specific to Western democracies, rather than to foreign states in general. The coefficient of Hedging state instead reduces the odds of the phrase by about half ($e^{-0.731} \approx 0.48$).

Table 3: Logistic Regression: Western Democracies Drive the Phrase

Dependent Variable: Model:	Non-interference Phrase					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Territorial issue	2.015*** (0.0880)		1.965*** (0.0869)	2.076*** (0.0880)	2.000*** (0.0879)	1.618*** (0.1533)
Western democracies		1.117*** (0.0856)	1.057*** (0.0885)			0.8631*** (0.1087)
Western excl. U.S.				0.5713*** (0.0796)		
Hedging state					-0.7310*** (0.1255)	
Territory x Western						0.4308*** (0.1599)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19,130	19,130	19,130	19,130	19,130	19,130

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Standard errors are clustered by date in parentheses. STM topic proportions in the questions are controlled for, excluding the baseline and territorial topics. Territorial issue, Western democracies, and Swing state are coded based on keywords in the questions. The results in Model (2), Model (3), and Model (6) remain stable when adopting the high-certainty coding of Western democracies (Appendix).

Finally, the interaction term in Model (6) is positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This means that China is most likely to adopt the phrase when both a territorial issue and a Western democracy are mentioned in the question. Table 4 further disentangles this relationship by calculating the difference in adoption rates of the phrase. Among territorial questions, moving from a non-Western to a Western state increases the proba-

bility of the phrase by 21.4 percentage points, from 9.1 % to 30.5 %. In addition, when non-Western countries are named, mentioning a territorial issue increases the probability of the phrase appearing by only 7.4 percentage points (from 1.7 % to 9.1 %), while Western democracies increase it by 25.7 percentage points (from 4.8 % to 30.5 %). One may suspect that non-Western countries would not raise territorial issues to avoid conflict with China, and therefore these topics would co-occur less frequently in the MOFA dataset. Admittedly, hedging or friendly states are less likely to appear in the question along with territorial issues than Western democracies do. Nonetheless, the findings still suggest that non-Western countries do appear in questions about territorial issues, but China is markedly less likely to answer them with the non-interference phrase. The phrase is therefore targeted against Western democracies, as we argue.

Table 4: Differences in Adoption of the Non-interference Phrase by Territorial Issue and Western Democracy

	Non-Western Count (% DV=1)	Western Count (% DV=1)	Δ Western (pp)
Non-territorial	7,983 (1.7%)	8,186 (4.8%)	+3.1
Territorial	1,017 (9.1%)	1,944 (30.5%)	+21.4
Δ Territorial (pp)	+7.4	+25.7	

Notes. Cells report the number and percentage of questions whose answer adopts the non-interference phrase (DV= 1), by whether the question raises a territorial issue and whether it names a Western democracy. Margins report percentage-point (pp) differences in the adoption rate. The two margins reveal a strong interaction rather than two additive main effects.

To further demonstrate this point, we provide qualitative comparisons between similar issues raised by the West and by the non-West, with the former resulting in a use of the non-interference phrase while the latter did not. For instance, Taiwan is a topic that frequently makes China adopt the key phrase, particularly when a foreign entity treats Taiwan as an independent state. For instance, on July 18, 2016, a journalist asked, “It is reported that former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns is in Taiwan for meetings with Taiwan politicians. What is China’s comment on that?” To this question, China responded

with the phrase, saying that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. Taiwan affairs are China’s internal affairs. We urge the US side to abide by the one-China policy...[and] refrain from interfering in China’s internal affairs.” However, in another similar instance where Taiwan was treated as a sovereign state by the Philippines, China mentioned the one-China policy but did not adopt the non-interference phrase. On December 8, 2017, a journalist asked, “Taiwan and the Philippines signed seven cooperation documents... What’s your comment on this?” China responded that it “firmly oppose[s] [a country] conducting with Taiwan any form of official engagement or signing any agreement or cooperation document with sovereign implication...We hope the Philippines will abide by the one-China principle.” While both signing cooperation documents and holding diplomatic meetings have sovereign implications, the non-interference phrase was used against the US but not the Philippines.

Foreign entities also criticize China for suppressing separatist movements and religious freedom in Tibet and Xinjiang. On July 2, 2020, a journalist mentioned that “the European Union criticized the human rights situation in Xinjiang.” China responded that it “oppose[s] interference in other countries’ internal affairs...and urge countries concerned to...stop interfering in other countries’ domestic affairs under the disguise of human rights.” Importantly, China added that “a large number of friendly nations and developing countries have been voicing their support for China’s achievements in counter-terrorism and de-radicalization in Xinjiang as well as measures to guarantee the human rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang according to law, and their opposition to interference in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of human rights.” This implies that, as we argue, the non-interference phrase is the rhetorical pitch under which China is cultivating support among friendly countries.

In contrast to when the EU raises the Xinjiang issue, when a multi-national organization that includes non-Western countries raised a similar concern, China did not adopt the phrase. On October 31, 2013, a journalist said, “the “World Uyghur Congress” reportedly expressed doubt over China’s handling of the October 28 incident and called for an indepen-

dent investigation of it.² It also criticized China’s policies on ethnic groups and religions,” and asked China’s view on this. In response, China rejected the criticism without using the key phrase, saying, “China is a country under the rule of law and the Chinese government protects the rights of all ethnic groups, including their freedom of religious belief, in accordance with law.” Similarly, when a non-Western country mentioned human rights issues, China denied the accusation but did not adopt the phrase. On December 27, 2021, a journalist said, “According to a report by the Hindustan Times on December 24, people familiar with the matter citing intelligence reports from Indian security agencies, said that Chinese authorities have begun sending Tibetan children to special camps to be indoctrinated with a Sinicised worldview.” To this, China provided a simple response, saying, “This report of the Hindustan Times is pure disinformation and completely unfounded.”

Powerful Versus Weak Actors?

An alternative explanation to the actor effect would be that China adopts the rhetorical device against powerful countries but not against weak countries. This is plausible, especially considering that China can easily impose sanctions on the latter, while it is difficult to take any concrete action against the former beyond making such verbal warnings. To address this alternative explanation, we include economic and military power as control variables and examine whether the effect of Western democracies survives. Specifically, for question i in year t , we let $\mathcal{S}_i$ be the subset of entities that are sovereign countries, excluding multinational organizations. Then, we measure the economic and military capability of those entities, and define an observation’s power as the capability of the most powerful state in the question:

²The October 28 incident likely indicates the 2013 Tiananmen Square car attack in Beijing. Chinese authorities declared that this was a deliberate terrorist attack committed by Uighur ethnic minorities from Xinjiang. Wan, William. 2013. Oct 30. “Chinese Police say Tiananmen Square Crash was ‘Premeditated, Violent, Terrorist Attack.’” *The Washington Post*.

$$\text{GDP}_i^{\max} = \max_{c \in \mathcal{S}_i} \log \text{GDP}_{c,t}, \quad \text{MIL}_i^{\max} = \max_{c \in \mathcal{S}_i} \log \text{MilExp}_{c,t},$$

each standardized to z -scores. Here, the economic and military capacity are measured with two indicators from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators: GDP in current USD (NY.GDP.MKTP.CD) and military expenditure in current USD (MS.MIL.XPND.CD, sources from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), retrieved from the WDI package for 2010-2022. For each sovereign country, we filled in years with missing GDP or military spending by linear interpolation between available values. Any remaining gaps at the start or end of a country’s record were filled in by re-using the nearest available value forward or backward. States with no reported data (e.g., the DPRK) do not contribute to a question’s maximum. This results in the sample with 14,125 questions naming at least one measurable sovereign foreign country. With this measurement and sample, our full logistic regression model is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(\Pr(Y_i = 1)) = & \beta_1 \text{Terr}_i + \beta_2 \text{West}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Terr}_i \times \text{West}_i) + \beta_4 \text{GDP}_i^{\max} + \beta_5 \text{MIL}_i^{\max} \\ & + \beta_6 (\text{Terr}_i \times \text{GDP}_i^{\max}) + \beta_7 (\text{Terr}_i \times \text{MIL}_i^{\max}) + \sum_{k \in \mathcal{K}} \gamma_k \theta_{ik} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_i, \end{aligned}$$

where δ_t are year fixed effects, θ_{ik} are STM topic proportions (with $\mathcal{K}$ excluding the baseline and territorial topics), and standard errors are clustered by date. Because δ_t absorbs China’s own capability each year, including logged absolute power is equivalent to controlling for each state’s power *relative to* China within the year.

Table 5 reports the regression results, controlling for the maximum economic and military capacities in standardized forms. The findings suggest that the effect of Western democracies does not reduce to these states’ economic or military capacities. In Models (1) through (4), the coefficient of the West remains stable and significant. The interaction term between territorial issues and the West is significant in Model (5) only. Nevertheless, compared to

Model (6) in Table 3, the magnitude of the coefficient is bigger in all specifications. The larger standard errors here are likely due to the further reduced number of questions that include both the non-West and territorial issues while restricting the sample to sovereign states. On the contrary, the Power terms are not individually significant, and the signs are unstable. This gives little support to the possibility that China’s non-interference rhetoric is targeted against powerful entities once Western actors are accounted for.

Table 5: Non-interference Phrase with Controls for Economic and Military Power

Dependent Variable:	Non-interference Phrase				
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	No power	GDP	Military	Both (Power)	Interaction
Territorial issue	1.585*** (0.2757)	1.587*** (0.2754)	1.583*** (0.2767)	1.627*** (0.2891)	1.464*** (0.2965)
Western democracies	0.8633*** (0.1631)	0.9117*** (0.1838)	0.8833*** (0.1777)	0.9626*** (0.1968)	0.8705*** (0.1995)
Territory $\times$ Western	0.4809 (0.2747)	0.4851 (0.2754)	0.4859 (0.2776)	0.4444 (0.2897)	0.6847* (0.3325)
log GDP (max, z)		-0.0334 (0.0648)		-0.2520 (0.2926)	0.0043 (0.3258)
log Mil. exp. (max, z)			-0.0157 (0.0641)	0.2103 (0.2877)	-0.0133 (0.3208)
Territory $\times$ log GDP					-0.9246 (0.5356)
Territory $\times$ log Mil					0.8143 (0.4963)
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	14,102	14,102	14,102	14,102	14,102

Notes. Logistic regressions of the non-interference phrase. The sample comprises questions naming at least one sovereign foreign country. Power is the maximum, across the sovereign countries named in the question, of (log) GDP and (log) military expenditure in current US\$ for the question’s year, each standardized (z). All models include year fixed effects and STM topic-proportion controls (excluding the baseline and territorial topics). Standard errors clustered by date in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Partner Protection on Non-Territorial Issues

This section focuses on the question of how China’s adoption of our key phrase has evolved over time and test Hypotheses 2 and 2-1. As such, part of this analysis is restricted to the sample where China used the non-interference phrase (DV=1). For each of these observations, we manually read the Q&A and hand-coded (1) the actors who are accused of interfering in internal affairs and (2) the issue that they are interfering with. Note that not all observations have actors, especially when they are not specified or the phrase is used as a general principle. Table 6 provides the list and number of the most frequently mentioned actors, issues, as well as the combinations between the two.

The summary statistics reveal that Western democracies dominate instances of alleged interference, with the United States accounting for over 50 percent of all key-phrase mentions (Panel A). The US interferes in various topics, from Hong Kong and Taiwan to human rights, democracy, the China threat, as well as Venezuelan politics (Panel B). The United Kingdom often interferes in Hong Kong and human rights issues; Japan frequently talks about Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang; and the EU, Canada, and Australia comment on Hong Kong affairs (Panel B). Non-Western actors in the top 15 are rare, limited largely to the UN and India. Unlike Western actors’ critiques against a broad range of issues, India’s instances are event-specific. Four out of five instances involving India were raised in June-July 2017 regarding Doklam, an area claimed by both China and Bhutan, with India supporting Bhutan’s position. The other one was when India’s special forces were on standby to evacuate Indians from the Maldives in 2018.

As to the interfering topics, foreign entities most frequently interfere in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang affairs, as expected (Panel A). Yet, beyond these territorial topics, three strands of issues are further listed here. The first is value-related issues such as human rights, democracy, and religious freedom;³ The second group is third-party countries, Venezuela and

³Human rights co-occurs with place topics in 46 percent of the cases, with Xinjiang (65), Hong Kong (22), Tibet (14), Taiwan (6), South China Sea (3), East China Sea (2) and/or Macao (1). Democracy co-occurs

Table 6: Most Frequently Hand-Coded Countries/Actors and Topics in Answers Adopting the Non-interference Phrase

Panel A: Top 15 Countries/Actors and Topics			
Country / Actor	N	Topic	N
United States	687	Hong Kong	377
United Kingdom	129	Taiwan	226
Australia	62	Xinjiang	219
Japan	58	Human rights	169
EU	55	Tibet	55
Canada	48	Democracy	29
Western countries	48	China threat	28
Foreign actors	39	Religious freedom	26
UN	23	South China Sea	26
Germany	19	Venezuela	23
G7	18	U.S.–China relations	15
France	10	Chinese influence in Australia	14
New Zealand	9	Espionage	13
India	7	Afghanistan	11
Czech Republic	5	Judicial sovereignty	10

Panel B: Top 20 Country/Actor $\times$ Topic Pairs			
Pair	N	Pair	N
United States $\times$ Hong Kong	177	Canada $\times$ Hong Kong	19
United States $\times$ Taiwan	158	Japan $\times$ Hong Kong	19
United States $\times$ Xinjiang	122	United States $\times$ China threat	19
United States $\times$ Human rights	94	Australia $\times$ Hong Kong	18
United Kingdom $\times$ Hong Kong	92	United States $\times$ Venezuela	18
United States $\times$ Tibet	38	Canada $\times$ Xinjiang	15
Japan $\times$ Taiwan	36	EU $\times$ Xinjiang	15
United States $\times$ Democracy	26	United Kingdom $\times$ Human rights	15
EU $\times$ Hong Kong	25	United States $\times$ U.S.–China relations	15
United States $\times$ Religious freedom	25	Japan $\times$ Xinjiang	14

Notes. Entries are counts of hand-coded country/actor and topic labels in answers coded as adopting the non-interference phrase; multi-label cells are split on “;” and counted separately. The fifteen most frequent labels (Panel A) and twenty most frequent pairs (Panel B) are shown, ordered by frequency. Pure placeholder codes (*Not specified*, 40; *N/A*, 14) are retained.

Afghanistan; The final one is those related to international order, such as the China threat, U.S.-China relations, Chinese influence in Australia, and espionage. These suggest that the adoption of the non-interference phrase is not restricted to territorial sovereignty issues. Instead, as we demonstrate below, it is used to establish an alternative definition of sovereignty, with which China not only protects itself but also its partners from the West.

Topic Expansion to Values and International Order

The second hypothesis posits that in recent years, China has increasingly adopted the non-interference phrase to refer to broader, non-territorial issues in relation to its partner states. To test this hypothesis, we first examine whether China indeed adopted the phrase when a question raises non-territorial issues, and if so, which issues are protected under what circumstances. To do so, we first list all the unique values of hand-coded topics and then group them into territorial versus non-territorial topics as in Table 7. Under the relaxed definition, an observation is classified as non-territorial if it contains at least one non-territorial label. Under the narrow definition, an observation is non-territorial if it contains non-territorial labels only and no territorial labels. For example, a topic with both Xinjiang and human rights is classified as non-territorial under the relaxed definition, whereas it is not under the narrow definition.

Table 8 summarizes the distribution of territorial versus non-territorial topics across two variants of the dependent variable. As conventional wisdom suggests, in more than half of the instances, the phrase is used to defend China’s own territorial issues. Nonetheless, what is more striking is that non-territorial topics account for as high as 34.8 percent (narrow definition) to 54 percent (relaxed) of all instances with the phrase. When the phrase is used for China itself (DV1 only), non-territorial issues are invoked in 32.7 percent of the cases with a relaxed definition. Here, human rights issues explain more than half of the instances (56.5 percent), followed by bilateral relations (18.7 percent), democracy & order with place topics in 28 percent of cases, with Taiwan (5), Xinjiang (3), and/or Hong Kong (1).

Table 7: Classification of Hand-Coded Topics into Territorial and Non-territorial Categories

Category	Example topic labels
<i>Territorial</i>	Hong Kong; Taiwan; Xinjiang; Tibet; South China Sea; East China Sea; Diaoyu Islands; Macao; Inner Mongolia; Doklam; China–India border
<i>Non-territorial</i>	
Human rights	Human rights; Religious freedom; Human trafficking; Judicial sovereignty
Media freedom	Media Freedom; Press freedom; Chinese media
Democracy & order	Democracy; Authoritarianism; Liberal international order; China threat; Hegemony
Sanctions	Sanctions; Embargo; Visa-ban; Arms exports
Chinese influence	China influence in [country]; Political influence; Election interference; Espionage
Bilateral relations	U.S.–China relations; Australia–China relations; foreign elections; detainees
Security	DPRK; Korean Peninsula; THAAD; SCO; military cooperation; terrorism
Third-country	Venezuela; Myanmar; Cuba; Syria; Belarus; Zimbabwe; Catalonia; Scotland; Solomon Islands independence
Principle	General principle of non-interference

Notes. A topic is classified as territorial if it names any sovereignty or maritime place above. A topic is classified as non-territorial if it contains at least one theme from the list. Under the narrow definition, a topic is classified as non-territorial only if it contains a non-territorial theme and no territorial place. Certain topics are excluded from both categories, such as COVID-19.

(11.3 percent), and Chinese influence (10 percent). When the phrase is used as a general principle or to defend others (DV2 only), non-territorial issues are raised in 98.5 percent of the cases, which is expected as the territorial issues themselves mostly concern China. In such cases, third-party country names often become the topic (64.7 percent), followed by human rights issues (15.9 percent), democracy & order (12.9 percent), and general principle (12.4 percent).

Theoretically, we are interested in examining whether China adopts the phrase to defend non-territorial issues more often in recent years, particularly for others. The descriptive plot

Table 8: Phrase-Uses by Defended Party and Topic Type

	Territorial only	Non-territorial only	Both topics	Total
DV1 (defend self)	637 (53.5%)	205 (17.2%)	105 (8.8%)	947 (79.5%)
DV2 (general or others)	3 (0.3%)	196 (16.5%)	5 (0.4%)	204 (17.1%)
Both (DV1 & DV2)	15 (1.3%)	13 (1.1%)	12 (1.0%)	40 (3.4%)
Total	655 (55.0%)	414 (34.8%)	122 (10.2%)	1,191 (100%)

Notes. Counts (and percentages of all 1,191 classified phrase-using answers) by whether the phrase is used to defend its own affairs (DV1), as a general principle or to defend others (DV2), or both, and by topic type. Observations whose only topic is uncoded (e.g., COVID-19) are excluded. Percentages may not sum exactly to row or column totals due to rounding.

in Figure 2 previews the results: First, it is true that China adopts the non-interference phrase far more often to protect its own territorial issues, and those instances have exploded since 2018. Second, more importantly, it is genuinely a recent phenomenon that the phrase is used to protect others’ non-territorial issues. The number of such cases was zero in 2012 and 2013, and it was a single-digit number until 2018. Yet, the number increased to 18 cases in 2019, and then jumped to 79 cases in 2021 and 70 cases in 2022.

Because the volume of press-conferences and Q & A pairs itself rose sharply over the period, raw counts alone are not reliable. Hence, we run a negative binomial regression that includes the log number of questions as an offset, so that the coefficient reflects growth in the non-territorial phrase per question. The model specifications and results are detailed in the Appendix. The results show that the per-question rate of defending others on non-territorial issues increases by about 46.8 percent per year ($e^{0.382} - 1$), and non-territorial use in general increases by about 35 percent per year. In comparison, territorial use of the phrase—both in general and for China—increases at a lower rate, by about 23.5 percent per year.

Now, we conduct a formal test on whether the increase in the non-territorial interference phrase is statistically significant after accounting for the topics raised in the questions as well as the spokespersons’ speech styles. Specifically, for question i answered in year $t(i)$ by spokesperson $s(i)$, we let

$$Y_i^{\text{DV2}} = 1 \quad \text{if} \quad \text{DV2}_i = 1 \wedge \text{NonTerr}_i = 1,$$

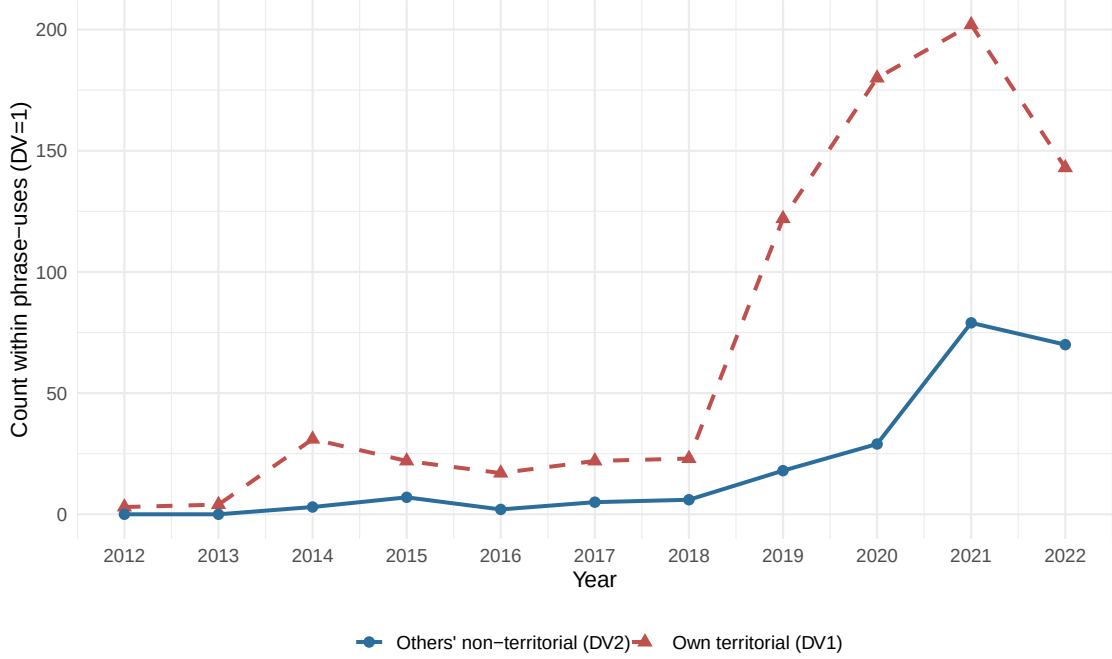


Figure 2: China's Territorial Issues v. Others' Non-Territorial Issues

that is, the answer invokes the non-interference phrase to defend others' internal affairs (DV2) *and* the topic is non-territorial (relaxed definition). Y_i^{DV2} is coded 0 for all other questions (no phrase, phrase only for China, or a territorial topic). The model is then a logistic regression:

$$\text{logit}(\Pr(Y_i^{DV2} = 1)) = \beta \text{Year}_i + \sum_{k \neq 19} \gamma_k \theta_{ik} + \alpha_{s(i)} + \varepsilon_i,$$

estimated on the full sample, where Year_i is the year centered at 2012, θ_{ik} are the question's STM topic proportions (all topics except the reference), $\alpha_{s(i)}$ are spokesperson fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered by date. The coefficient β gives the per-year change in the log-odds that an observation with the key phrase defends a non-territorial issue of others.

The results are shown in Table 9, with Model (1) as the main specification. It shows that after controlling for the question topics and spokespersons, the odds of a key phrase being adopted for others' non-territorial issues are multiplied by 1.6 ($e^{0.464}$) each year. This also holds when a narrow definition of non-territorial is adopted (Model (2)). Model (3)

further shows that this trend has become prominent since 2019: the odds of a non-territorial issue co-occurring with our target phrase are multiplied by 7.0 ($e^{1.95}$) post-2018. All of these results support our second hypothesis, and again, this increasing trend is not due to the rise in the number of non-territorial questions by journalists. In fact, the association between year and non-territorial questions is negative and not significant (Appendix).

Table 9: The Non-interference Phrase Expands Toward Non-territorial Topics and Third-Party Defense

	DV3 non-territorial			General non-territorial		
	(1) Trend	(2) Narrow	(3) Post-2018	(4) Trend	(5) Post-2018	(6) Gap
Dependent variable	DV3 $\times$ non-terr.			Phrase $\times$ non-terr.		Stacked
Year (2012 = 0)	0.4638*** (0.0613)	0.4488*** (0.0630)		0.2429*** (0.0376)		0.2143*** (0.0282)
Post-2018			1.951*** (0.2840)		0.8199*** (0.1748)	
Non-territorial (2012 gap)						-0.8460*** (0.1963)
Year $\times$ Non-territorial						0.0579* (0.0242)
STM topic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	—
Spokesperson FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	18,695	18,695	18,695	18,695	18,695	37,952

Notes. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Logistic regressions on the full sample (denominator = all Q & A), with spokesperson fixed effects and standard errors clustered by date. The outcome in columns (1)–(3) is whether the phrase is used to defend other countries (DV3) on a non-territorial topic; in columns (4)–(6) is whether an answer adopts the non-interference phrase on a non-territorial topic. Columns (1)–(5) control for the question’s STM topic proportions (all topics except the reference). Column (6) is a stacked specification in which each question enters twice, once as a non-territorial and once as a territorial phrase-use (territorial as the reference level). That is, $\text{logit}(y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Year} + \beta_2 \text{NonTerr} + \beta_3 \text{Year} \times \text{NonTerr} + \alpha_{\text{spokesperson}}$.

Additionally, Models (4) and (5) show that non-territorial use of the phrase in general is increasing as well, both for others and for China itself. The magnitude of the coefficient is about half the size, understandably because it averages the steep third-party rise with the more gradual rise in self-directed non-territorial use. Finally, Model (6) further suggests that while territorial use of the phrase is increasing as well (0.214), the non-territorial use is increasing at a slightly higher rate (0.272), as the positive and significant interaction term

shows.

Protecting Partners from Western Democracies

Third-party countries account for 29.7 percent of all non-territorial topics when the phrase was invoked, making it the second most frequent non-territorial topic after human rights. This raises a further question: when China invokes non-interference on behalf of others, who are the “others” it protects? Hypothesis 2-1 posits that they are countries friendly to China, most of them non-democracies, and that the actors interfering in these countries’ internal affairs are Western democracies.

Table 10 summarizes these cases, pairing the country whose affairs China defends (Defended) with the actor China identifies as interfering (Interfering). The pattern is clear and consistent across cases. All of the defended parties are non-Western, either hedging states or China partners, and except for the UN, all of the interfering actors are Western democracies. The United States alone accounts for 77 of the 122 interferer mentions (63 percent). Other Western interfering actors include the EU, Canada, the UK, and NATO. As such, the phrase is used to protect non-Western states from Western democracies, especially the U.S. and those who are part of the U.S.-led international order.

The qualitative examples below illustrate what specific internal affairs of friendly countries China is trying to protect from Western democracies. In each case, a Western actor criticizes or sanctions a non-Western state over its domestic conduct, and China responds by invoking the non-interference phrase on that state’s behalf:

- Q. The U.S. is seeking to ensure that Venezuelan oil revenues go to the country’s self-declared interim president and not to Nicholas Maduro’s regime.
A. China is opposed to foreign interference in **Venezuela**’s affairs. (2019-01-25)
- Q. **Russian** opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s recent arrest after returning to Moscow has been condemned by some Western countries, including the United States.

Table 10: Whom China Defends and Against Whom? (Third-Party Topic Subset)

Interfering	U.S.	EU	Canada	UK	NATO	West others ^a	UN	Other	Total
Defended									
Venezuela	19	2	2	1				5	29
Cuba	11								11
Afghanistan	9							2	11
Russia	7	1				3			11
Syria	4	1		1	1	1		1	9
Zimbabwe	5					1			6
Latin America	5								5
Myanmar							3	2	5
Belarus	1	1	1	1				1	5
Iraq	2	1			1				4
Ethiopia	1							2	3
Solomon Islands	2						1		3
Iran	2								2
Libya	1				1				2
Nepal	2								2
Sri Lanka	1						1		2
Other ($n = 1$) ^b	5	1					1	5	12
Total	77	7	3	3	3	7	5	17	122

Notes. Cell entries are the number of third-party-defense (DV3) phrase-using answers pairing the defended party (from the coded topic) with the actor China casts as interfering (from the coded country). A single answer may name more than one interferer, so it can appear in multiple columns. Same-country variants of the defended party are merged (e.g., *Cuba* with *Embargo/Sanctions on Cuba*; *Russia* with *Russia-Ukraine*, *Russian affairs/election*, *U.S.-Russia relations*; *Venezuela* with *Venezuela(n) politics*).

^a “West (other)” groups the remaining Western-aligned interferers: Western countries (5), Australia (1), and France (1).

^b Defended parties with a single mention: Africa, Bhutan, Cambodia, Central Asia, Eritrea, Fiji, Maldives, Middle East, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sudan, UAE.

A. China is consistently opposed to external interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. (2021-01-22)

- Q. The U.S. Treasury Department announced the imposition of sanctions on **Cuba**.

A. We resolutely reject any external interference in other countries' internal affairs, and attempt to gang up on other countries under the pretext of "freedom", "democracy", and "human rights". (2021-07-23)

- Q. U.S. President Joe Biden said that the decision to end the **Afghan** War is the right one for America.

A. We hope the U.S. will stop using democracy and human rights as an excuse to arbitrarily interfere in other countries' internal affairs. (2021-07-18)

Two features of these responses are worth noting. First, China primarily defends the principle that the conduct of friendly countries is not a legitimate object of external judgment; it does not always directly defend the specific political conduct in question. Second, the criticism China rejects is framed by Western actors as an issue of democracy and human rights, and it is precisely this framing that China opposes. That is, what China rejects is the claim that democracy and human rights provide valid ground for one state to comment on or act against another.

We argue that this is an alternative definition of sovereignty that China is trying to put forward against the established one. As in [Seppänen and Smith \(2025\)](#), "An orthodox reading of the doctrine of non-intervention [as a rule of international law] does not prohibit commentary on human rights conditions in foreign States. Moreover, governments in liberal democracies seldom feel the need to refer to the doctrine when they are accused of violating international human rights law" (p.379). Compared to this orthodox definition of non-intervention, China's usage is distinctive, as it treats commentary on other states' human rights and democracy as a form of interference. China's norm of sovereignty is therefore stricter than the one defined by the US and its allies.

Partners Joining China

Another interesting observation is that, just as China defends non-Western partners against Western criticism, those partners in turn defend China's internal affairs against Western democracies. This is significant because [Lim and Ikenberry \(2023\)](#) predict that China, as a “would-be hegemonic” state, would not only “shape and control the rules and institutions of order” but also “attract [weaker and secondary] states into its orbit” (p.16). China cites these instances in its press conferences, and these instances support our claim that the non-interference phrase serves as a rhetorical device to attract followers of its alternative norm of sovereignty among friendly countries. Below are examples of such instances:

- **Pakistan** spoke on behalf of 65 countries. It stressed Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet issues are China's internal affairs. A handful of **Western countries** interfered in China's internal affairs, which is rejected by developing countries. (2021-09-27)
- **Lebanon**...jointly reject politicization of and double standards on human rights and interference in China's domestic affairs. (2021-07-20)
- **Nigeria** has just endorsed the joint statement of friendly countries in support of China. They stressed that issues relating to Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan are China's internal affairs. **Western countries** have been blatantly meddling in other countries' domestic affairs with human rights as a cover. (2021-07-14)
- The **Egyptian** side said it firmly opposes foreign interference in China's internal affairs under the pretext of issues relating to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet. (2021-07-19)
- A majority of friendly and developing countries have spoken out collectively to support China's position and measures on Xinjiang-related matters. The joint statement made by **Cuba**...stop using Xinjiang-related matters to interfere in China's internal affairs. (2021-03-15)

- On behalf of 70 countries, **Belarus**... support for China’s practice of one country, two systems in the Hong Kong SAR...urge the relevant party [**Western countries**] to .. stop interfering in Hong Kong affair and China’s internal affair. (2021-03-08)
- China appreciates the objective and unbiased position upheld by the **Pakistani and UAE** sides. It has also proven that the lies on Xinjiang concocted by a handful of anti-China elements in the **West** are nothing but a farce to malign and smear China. Their attempts to interfere in China’s internal affairs will not succeed. (2021-02-08)
- Q. China and **Russia**...co-hosted a webinar on “Democracy & Human Rights: Common Goals with Diversified Approaches.” A. The international community should put an end to certain countries’ monopoly over defining democracy and allow various forms of democracy to flourish. Democracy is a value shared by all mankind, not a tool used by a few [**Western**] **countries** to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs. (2021-11-22)

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