

# CHINA AS A “CYBER GREAT POWER”: BEIJING’S TWO VOICES IN TELECOMMUNICATIONS

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## SIX TAKEAWAYS

**1** While China repeatedly discusses its “cyber great power” ambitions internally, those are rarely acknowledged in outward-facing messaging. The phrase “cyber great power” is a key concept guiding Chinese strategy in telecommunications as well as IT more broadly. It appears in the title of almost every major speech by President Xi Jinping on China’s telecommunications and network strategy aimed at a domestic audience since 2014. But the phrase is rarely found in messaging aimed at external foreign audiences, appearing only once in six years of remarks by Foreign Ministry spokespersons. This suggests that Beijing intentionally dilutes discussions of its ambitions in order not to alarm foreign audiences.

**2** Even as the Chinese government encourages foreign audiences to purchase Huawei products, its leaders warn domestic audiences of the dangers that stem from reliance on foreign technology. Years before the trade war and the Trump administration’s restrictions on Huawei, Xi argued that “the control of core technology by others is our biggest hidden danger” and that allowing foreigners to control core technology “is like building a house on someone else’s foundation.”<sup>1</sup> He declared that “China must have its own technology, and it must have strong technology.”<sup>2</sup>

**3** The Chinese government encourages foreign audiences skeptical of Huawei to adhere to market principles. At the same time, the government cautions domestic audiences that IT network development requires industrial policy and cannot be entrusted to market forces. Xi has declared, explicitly, that “market exchange cannot bring us core technologies, and money cannot buy core technologies.”<sup>3</sup>

**4** Beijing calls foreign security concerns over Huawei “lame excuse[s]” and pure “politics.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, China expresses similar concerns domestically over the incorporation of foreign technology into its networks. Security is paramount for Xi, who

has repeatedly declared that “without cyber security, there will be no national security.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, he argues for adoption only of foreign technology that is “controllable” — while leaders at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) stress that foreign technology networks tend not to be “controllable.”<sup>6</sup> China must therefore build its own networks that are both “independent and controllable.”<sup>7</sup>

**5** Commercial and academic Chinese sources suggest that the international community’s security concerns over Chinese telecommunications might not be misplaced, and that Beijing might see telecommunications and other commercial networks as means to project offensive power globally. Xi presents IT as a key part of China’s military-civil fusion strategy: In 2018, he said that “military-civil fusion in cybersecurity and informatization is the key field and frontier field for military-civil fusion.”<sup>8</sup> Downstream, Qin An, director of the China Institute of Cyberspace Strategy, argued in 2016 that “due to the highly monopolistic nature of information technology systems, it is unlikely that there will be two different systems for military and civilian use ... it is particularly necessary [for China] to integrate military and civilian resources through a military-civil fusion system.”<sup>9</sup>

**6** When discussing standard-setting with foreign audiences, the Chinese government stresses win-win collaboration. Yet domestic discussion emphasizes the competitive value of standards for establishing technological dominance and, correspondingly, the need to build “discourse power” in global IT development. Xi argues that in cyber security and telecommunications, the “game of great powers is not only a game of technology but also a game of ideas and discourse power,” a reference to internet governance and standards.<sup>10</sup> Other sources build on Xi’s language, noting that China works to set standards in 5G — and IT more broadly — in order to overtake the West, that doing so provides economic and military advantages. In short, those “who set the standards gain the world.”<sup>11</sup>



# BEIJING'S TWO VOICES IN TELECOMMUNICATIONS

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*The Chinese government outwardly messages a set of assumptions and goals that contradict those communicated internally. Below are some key examples of those contradictions.*

## AMBITION: CHINA AS A “CYBER GREAT POWER”

**External messaging:** “The cyber security review system introduced by the relevant Chinese authorities is based on the fact that China has the largest number of netizens in the world and has become a major online country. The promulgation of the cybersecurity review will become the most effective legal basis for maintaining national cyber security and will play a major role in promoting the building of a cyber power.”<sup>12</sup>

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei in a press conference in May 2014 – the only appearance of the phrase “cyber power” in six years of remarks by Foreign Ministry spokespersons

**For internal Chinese audiences:** “The current and future period is a period of major strategic opportunities for my country to move from a large manufacturing country and a network power country to a manufacturing power country and a network power country. Facing the severe situation of international competition and the urgent requirements of my country’s high-quality development, we will accelerate the high-quality industry and information technology. Development is urgent.”<sup>13</sup>

Chen Zhaoxiang, the deputy director of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), in an article published in 2019

**Internal:** “Those who win will rejoice, those who lose will collapse. The competition in cyberspace is, in the final analysis, the competition for talents. To build a network power, without an outstanding talent team, without the burst of creativity and vitality of talents, it is difficult to succeed.”<sup>14</sup>

President Xi Jinping in a speech at a special forum focused on China’s cybersecurity and information work in 2016

**Internal:** “China needs to seize the commanding heights of technological competition related to the long-term and related to the overall situation.”<sup>15</sup>

| Chen Zhaoxiong in a talk to industry executives in 2019

## INDIGENIZATION: DEPENDENCE AS CHINA'S “HIDDEN DANGER”

**External:** “Restrictions on Huawei blatantly violated the market economy principles and free trade rules.”<sup>16</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying in a press conference in July 2020

**External:** “What the U.S. has done shows clearly that the market economy and fair competition principle it claims to champion is nothing but a fig leaf. Its behavior violates rules of international trade.”<sup>17</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian in a press conference in July 2020

**External:** “The use of security [against companies like Huawei] has neither factual basis nor compliance with international economic and trade rules.”<sup>18</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin in a press conference in November 2020

**Internal:** “The core technology of the internet is our biggest ‘fate,’ and it is our biggest hidden danger that the core technology is restricted by others.”<sup>19</sup>

**Internal:** “No matter how large an internet company is, no matter how high its market value is, if it is heavily dependent on foreign countries for its core components, and if the ‘major artery’ of the supply chain is in the hands of others, it is like building a house on someone else’s foundation. No matter how big and beautiful it is, it may not stand up to wind and rain, and it may be so vulnerable that it collapses at the first blow.”<sup>20</sup>

**Internal:** “On the one hand, core technology is the country’s most important weapon, and the most critical and core technology should be based on independent innovation and self-reliance. The market cannot buy core technologies, and money cannot buy core technologies.”<sup>21</sup>

**Internal:** “We do not reject any new technology. New technology is the result of the development of human civilization. As long as it is conducive to raising the level of social productivity in our country and improving the lives of the people, we will not reject it. The problem is to figure out which ones can be introduced but must be safe and controllable, which ones can be introduced, digested, absorbed and then innovated, which ones can be developed in cooperation with others, and which ones must be independently innovated on their own. The root problem of core technology is basic research. If basic research is not done well, applied technology will become water without a source and a tree without roots.”<sup>22</sup>

| All of the above quotes are from President Xi Jinping’s speech at a special forum focused on China’s cybersecurity and information work in 2016

## CYBER AND NETWORK SECURITY: “BOTH OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE”

**External:** “Promoting national security is such a lame excuse cited by the U.S. side... [restrictions on Huawei occurred under] the pretext of unwarranted risks.”<sup>23</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying in a press conference in December 2020

**External:** “The reason why the United States suppresses Huawei may be because it is worried that if other countries use Huawei, the United States will no longer be able to go through the back door and engage in eavesdropping.”<sup>24</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian in a press conference in October 2020

**Internal:** “Without network security, there would be no national security, and there would be no stable economic and social operation, and the interests of the broad masses of people would not be guaranteed.”<sup>25</sup>

| Xi Jinping in his landmark speech in 2018 on the “building of a network power”

**Internal:** “In the information age, there are multiple cultures and many ideas. Western countries use the advantages of information technology to carry out cultural penetration, ideological infiltration and political infiltration, in order to achieve political objectives. This will undoubtedly affect the Party’s ideology and ideological foundation.”<sup>26</sup>

| Liu Honglin of the Shanghai Municipal Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, in an article in the Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China – the highest-level institution for the political education of Chinese cadres

## STANDARD-SETTING: CHINA’S SEARCH FOR “DISCOURSE POWER”

**External:** “[International standard setting in telecom] should be win-win, collaborative, and inclusive.”<sup>27</sup>

**External:** “[China sought to] provide a blueprint for formulating global standards with mutual respect and shared governance efforts to build mutual trust, deepen cooperation, work together with others, and support multilateralism.”<sup>28</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian in a press conference in September 2020

**Internal:** “Under the conditions of economic globalization and modern market economy... standards are the commanding heights, the right to speak, and the right to control. Therefore, the one who obtains the standards gains the world. The first-rate enterprises sell standards, second-rate companies sell brands, and third-rate companies sell products.”<sup>29</sup>

| An interpretation of Xi Jinping thought on standardization published in Zhejiang Daily

**Internal:** “Mastering the standards by yourself, and building networks on your own will bring great guarantees to information and even national security.”<sup>30</sup>

| Published in Confidential Science and Technology

**Internal:** “The standards and core technologies of the internet are set by the United States. The internet is just a virtual world, and the Internet of Things is a huge system that connects all things in the world... If the key technologies and main standards of the Internet of Things are in the hands of Western developed countries, and [China] has no independent intellectual property rights, then China will have no chance of achieving its peaceful rise and national rejuvenation.”<sup>31</sup>

| Published in a provincial communications journal concerning the Internet of Things – the new revolution in information technology

**Internal:** “Principles put forward by Xi Jinping for governing cyberspace will also be recognized by all countries in the world and will become the basic norms for Internet governance in all countries.”<sup>32</sup>

| Sun Qiang, an invited researcher of the New Media Institute of the National Ideological Center, analyzing Xi Jinping’s speech at the 2016 World Internet Conference in Wuzhen

## MILITARY-CIVIL FUSION

**External:** “We strongly deplore and firmly oppose the repeated hyping and slandering against China’s civilian integration policy. It is a customary international practice to promote integrated development of military and civilian sectors. The U.S. is no exception. As I know, the U.S. Defense Department and military conduct various cooperation projects with American universities, R&D institutions and private companies. Some American multinational companies are the ‘military-civil fusion’ per se, as their business operations and products cover both ends.”<sup>33</sup>

**External:** “Some U.S. officials distorted China’s military-civilian integration policy in malicious disregard for facts and seek to place a technological embargo on China under this pretext, thus disrupting and impeding normal economic, trade and technological cooperation between China and other countries. This practice, born out of Cold War mentality, contravenes the spirit of international cooperation and the trend of the times. It undermines the interests of China, the U.S. and the common interests of all.”<sup>34</sup>

| Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang during a press conference in March 2020

**Internal:** “Cyber-information military-civilian fusion is the key field and frontier field of military-civilian fusion, and it is also the most dynamic and potential field of military-civilian fusion.”<sup>35</sup>

| Xi Jinping in 2018

**Internal:** “Due to the highly monopolistic nature of information technology systems, it is unlikely that there will be two different systems for military and civilian use.”<sup>36</sup>

**Internal:** “It is an arduous task for China to build a system that can rival the world’s advanced standard, therefore it is particularly necessary [for China] to integrate military and civilian resources through a military-civil fusion system.”<sup>37</sup>

Qin An, director of the China Cyberspace Strategy Research Institute and the former deputy editor-in-chief of Internet Information Security Magazine, during a speech at the China Information Technology Security Evaluation Center

**Internal:** “[China’s military] seeks the comprehensive integration of networked systems with the goal to integrate joint operations across three-dimensional information networks of land, sea, air, and space with every combat unit and even weapons platform, sensor, and other combat equipment connected safely, quickly, and seamlessly.”<sup>38</sup>

Published in the journal National Defense addressing the military applications of 5G technology

## ENDNOTES

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