

China and Normative Competition: A Signal-Pattern Analysis of Strategic Behaviour in the Contemporary International System

1. ABSTRACT

This article applies the Signal-Pattern Analysis (SPA) framework (Tymoshenko, 2026) to analyse China's strategic behaviour as a distinct configuration of signalling patterns within the contemporary international system. Rather than interpreting China's actions through conventional categories of great-power competition, the analysis focuses on the functional structure of observable signals and their aggregation into stable behavioural patterns.

Using SPA, Chinese signals are classified across institutional, economic, and rhetorical domains and interpreted within a dual-layer analytical structure that distinguishes between their functional role and strategic meaning. This approach reveals that China's behaviour is not oriented toward direct confrontation or immediate systemic disruption. Instead, it produces a consistent pattern of signals aimed at expanding alternative normative frameworks while maintaining formal integration within the existing system.

The study identifies a normative leadership pattern, in which influence is accumulated through the diffusion of compatible rules, standards, and institutional arrangements. This pattern reflects a strategy of gradual systemic transformation that reduces the exclusivity of dominant norms without requiring their direct replacement.

The findings demonstrate that U.S.–China interaction cannot be fully explained within a single competitive logic. Instead, it reflects the coexistence of structurally distinct signal-pattern configurations: a control-oriented model and a normative expansion pattern. SPA thus provides a framework for distinguishing and analysing these divergent logics within a unified analytical approach.

2. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary analyses of China's role in international relations are predominantly framed within the logic of great-power competition, where strategic behaviour is interpreted through categories such as rivalry, containment, or balancing. While these approaches capture observable tensions, they often fail to explain the internal structure of China's behaviour, particularly its combination of systemic integration and gradual transformation of the rules governing international interaction.

This study forms part of a broader research programme based on the Signal-Pattern Analysis (SPA) framework (Tymoshenko, 2026), which develops a method for analysing strategic behaviour through the identification and interpretation of signalling patterns. Within this programme, individual studies examine different configurations of strategic behaviour in order to build a cumulative understanding of contemporary international dynamics.

This article addresses this limitation by applying the Signal-Pattern Analysis (SPA) framework (Tymoshenko, 2026). SPA conceptualises international interaction as a configuration of observable signals that can be functionally classified, aggregated into recurring patterns, and interpreted within a dual-layer analytical structure. This allows for the reconstruction of strategic behaviour not from declared intentions or outcomes, but from the structured dynamics of signalling itself.

Within this framework, China's behaviour is analysed as a specific signal-pattern configuration rather than as a conventional competitive strategy. At the functional level, Chinese signals are directed toward expanding institutional platforms, reinforcing principles of sovereignty and development, and normalising alternative forms of coordination. At the interpretive level, these signals converge into a consistent strategic orientation that prioritises the gradual reconfiguration of the normative environment.

The central argument of this article is that China exhibits a normative leadership pattern, characterised by the expansion of influence through the diffusion of compatible rules and institutional practices. This pattern does not rely on direct systemic confrontation. Instead, it operates by reducing the dominance of a single normative framework and enabling the coexistence of multiple rule configurations within the same system.

By reconstructing China's strategic behaviour as a signal-pattern configuration, this study demonstrates how SPA enables a more precise differentiation between types of strategic logic. In contrast to control-oriented strategies, which rely on restriction, pressure, and selective engagement, China's behaviour reflects a pattern of cumulative normative expansion. This distinction is critical for understanding the structure of contemporary global competition and the emerging transformation of the international order.

3. Signal Classification and Pattern Formation

Within the SPA framework, China's strategic behaviour can be reconstructed through the identification and functional classification of observable signals across three primary domains: institutional, economic, and rhetorical. Each domain reflects a distinct functional role, while their interaction produces a coherent pattern of strategic behaviour.

At the institutional level, China generates signals through the creation and expansion of multilateral platforms and initiatives, including BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and parallel financial and development mechanisms. Functionally, these signals operate as instruments of system expansion, providing alternative frameworks for coordination and participation without requiring formal opposition to existing institutions.

At the economic level, signals are expressed through investment flows, infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and financial integration mechanisms. These signals perform a dual

function: they reinforce material interdependence while simultaneously embedding participating actors within China-compatible economic structures. As a result, economic engagement operates not only as cooperation but also as a mechanism of structural alignment.

At the rhetorical level, China consistently produces signals centred on sovereignty, non-interference, development, and multipolarity. Functionally, these signals serve to normalise alternative normative principles and reduce the perceived universality of Western-centric standards. Rather than directly contesting existing norms, they expand the range of acceptable interpretations within the system.

When aggregated, these signals form a stable pattern characterised by gradual expansion rather than direct confrontation. The interaction between institutional, economic, and rhetorical signals produces a cumulative effect in which alternative frameworks become increasingly embedded within the existing system.

Within SPA, this configuration can be defined as a normative expansion pattern, in which strategic influence is accumulated through the diffusion of compatible rules, standards, and institutional arrangements. This pattern reflects a long-term orientation toward reshaping the normative environment of international interaction rather than altering it through immediate systemic disruption.

4. Comparative Interpretation: Divergent Strategic Configurations

The reconstruction of China's behaviour as a normative expansion pattern gains analytical significance when contrasted with alternative strategic configurations identified through the SPA framework. In particular, a comparison with control-oriented strategies highlights the structural differences in how strategic influence is generated and exercised.

Within SPA, control-oriented configurations are characterised by signals aimed at restricting, shaping, or redirecting the behaviour of other actors. These signals typically operate through mechanisms of pressure, conditional engagement, and selective inclusion, producing patterns that seek to stabilise the system by limiting the range of acceptable actions. Strategic influence, in this configuration, is exercised through constraint and regulation.

In contrast, the normative expansion pattern identified in China's behaviour operates through a fundamentally different mechanism. Rather than constraining actors directly, it generates signals that expand the set of available frameworks within which actors can operate. Institutional initiatives, economic integration, and normative messaging collectively increase the accessibility and legitimacy of alternative arrangements, allowing influence to accumulate without direct coercion.

The key distinction between these configurations lies in the direction of systemic change. Control-oriented strategies attempt to preserve or stabilise an existing structure by managing deviations, while normative expansion strategies gradually transform the structure itself by

embedding alternative rules and practices. As a result, the two configurations are not simply competing within the same strategic space, but are operating on partially different structural levels.

This divergence explains why interactions between the United States and China cannot be fully captured within a single logic of competition. Instead, they reflect the coexistence of distinct signal-pattern configurations that generate different forms of strategic behaviour. SPA provides a unified analytical framework that makes it possible to identify, compare, and interpret these configurations without reducing them to a common denominator.

5. Conclusion

This study has applied the Signal-Pattern Analysis (SPA) framework (Tymoshenko, 2026) to reconstruct China's strategic behaviour as a coherent configuration of signalling patterns. By shifting the analytical focus from declared intentions and outcomes to the functional structure of observable signals, the analysis has demonstrated that China's behaviour cannot be fully captured within conventional models of great-power competition.

The classification of institutional, economic, and rhetorical signals and their aggregation into a stable pattern has revealed a strategic orientation best described as normative expansion. This configuration operates through the diffusion of alternative rules, standards, and institutional arrangements, enabling the gradual transformation of the normative environment without requiring direct systemic confrontation.

The comparative interpretation has further shown that this pattern differs structurally from control-oriented configurations, which rely on restriction, pressure, and selective engagement. The coexistence of these configurations indicates that contemporary global dynamics are shaped not by a single logic of competition, but by the interaction of distinct strategic patterns operating at different structural levels.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the analytical value of SPA as a framework capable of identifying, classifying, and comparing strategic behaviour across different contexts. By linking micro-level signals to macro-level configurations, SPA provides a systematic approach to reconstructing strategic logic and detecting emerging shifts in international interaction. This distinction highlights the analytical capacity of SPA not only to describe behaviour, but to differentiate underlying strategic logics within a shared system.

The findings suggest that the evolving international system is not only a function of power distribution, but also of competing signal-pattern configurations that shape the rules and structures of global interaction. In this context, SPA offers a basis for cumulative and comparative analysis, supporting the development of a more precise understanding of contemporary strategic behaviour.

This analysis builds on the SPA methodological framework introduced in:

Tymoshenko, N. (2026). Signal-Pattern Analysis (SPA): A Method for Analysing Strategic Behaviour in International Relations.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19792498>

and complements its application in:

Tymoshenko, N. (2026). Differentiated U.S. Strategy Toward Autocracies: Managing Competition within a Contested Unipolar System.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19793152>