Critical Issues Confronting China:
China and the Global Commons: Antarctica, the High Seas and Outer Space

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With China’s growing presence on the international stage in recent decades, how the country participates in the global commons has significant ramifications for the future. Carla Freeman, Director of the SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, Associate Research Professor in China Studies, and Chair of U.S.-China Relations 2020 at the Kluge Center of the Library of Congress, extensively examined China’s behavior across Antarctica, the high seas, and outer space and raised the question of whether China would extend its adamant defense of national sovereignty into the global commons once its technological capabilities become sufficient to alter the global norm of universal access.

Global commons refer to the vast and uninhabited areas beyond the sovereign control of any national government. In the 17th century, the Dutch East India Company legally challenged the Portuguese claim to a monopoly on certain sea routes to trade with the East Indies and insisted on open access to maritime waters. This freedom of navigation on the seas for the common benefit has been the international norm for the following three centuries. Although Congress has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that makes freedom of navigation part of international law, the U.S. has adhered to the Convention as customary law.

China’s relationship with the global commons is more ambiguous. Notwithstanding the impact of globalization on the diffusion of national power, China has been a fierce guardian of national sovereignty, while expanding its access to the global commons with its growing technological capabilities.

Historically, China has stressed scientific and technological development. It started a nuclear weapons program less than a decade after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and successfully tested its first atomic bomb in 1964 despite delays associated with the Great Leap Forward. It also started developing an artificial satellite program in the 1950s and a manned space program in the late 1960s. By 1970, China had launched a satellite into space. After Deng Xiaoping became the paramount leader of the country in the late 1970s, he pragmatically shifted the national priority from political class struggle to economic development, making the pursuit of science and technology a key pillar of his “Four Modernizations.” China then began to expand its use of the global commons. By the mid-1980s, it had established a scientific research station in Antarctica, begun a commercial satellite launch program, developed deep seabed mining technology, and
constructed nuclear ballistic missile submarines, among other achievements. This trend continued unabated, with investments in R&D and acquisitions of advanced technology sustained by Chinese government priorities over the following decades.

After Xi Jinping took power at the end of 2012, China’s long-held foreign policy doctrine, “conceal one’s strength and bide one’s time” (韬光养晦), established by Deng, began to yield to a more assertive posture (有所作为). Since 2015, China published a series of white papers with ever loftier goals and ambitions for the global commons, which the Chinese leaders call the “new strategic frontiers.” These goals have been tied into its grand vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Chinese Dream.

China’s behavior in the South China Sea is a posterchild of its growing ambitious and capabilities. It not only strictly guards its territorial sea—12 nautical miles from its border—but also seeks to require military vessels passing through its exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—200 nautical miles from its shore—to notify Chinese authorities prior to passing. China refused to participate in the arbitration before the UN tribunal brought by the Philippines in 2016. China has constructed islands out of a few rocks and built infrastructure there with potential military use. It has intimidated other surrounding countries in order to secure maritime resources as its own.

This pattern of behavior has alarmed foreign countries at all levels. They naturally wonder if this will play out in other parts of the global commons. China’s expanded activities, combined with its accelerating technological capabilities, exemplified by its Beidou (北斗) satellite system, and have shifted the strategic balance in these areas. Freeman noted that China’s ambitions on the global commons also affects its domestic policy environment. An indicative anecdote is the prominent display of children’s books in local Chinese bookstores, inspiring kids to become astronauts.

Freeman deemed China as increasingly seeing technological progress as an engine of its development for delivering opportunities for its future generations, and the global commons as interconnected frontier spaces for its technological advancement. She concluded with her central question: Will China be more open to international cooperation in these arenas, or pursue technological nationalism, expanding its sovereignty and challenging the open access norm that has preserved the global commons as areas beyond the political reach of any one sovereign state?