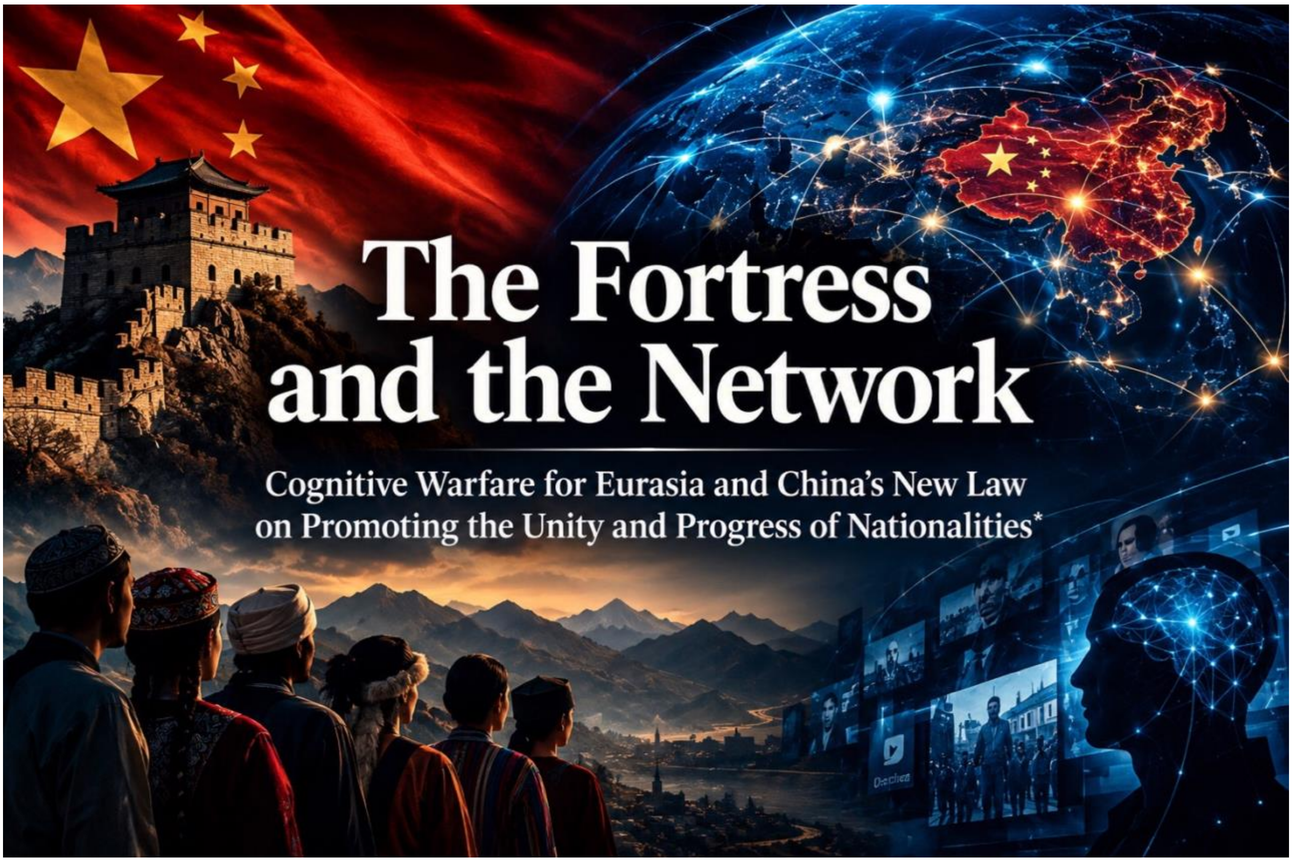
The Fortress and the Network

Cognitive Warfare for Eurasia and China's New Law on Promoting the Unity and Progress of Nationalities



Abstract

This essay argues that the emerging geopolitical competition across Eurasia cannot be adequately understood through the traditional framework of competing blocs, military alliances, or economic spheres of influence. Increasingly, strategic power depends on the ability to shape the networks through which identities, information, capital, security, and political legitimacy move across borders. At the same time, states are seeking to reduce the vulnerability of their internal societies to the external exploitation of ethnic, religious, and political identities.

The ***2026 Chinese Law on Promoting the Unity and Progress of Nationalities*** *provides a particularly revealing case. Commonly interpreted as an instrument of assimilation and tighter central control over ethnic minorities, the law can also be read as a form of structural cognitive defense: an attempt to reduce the internal "attack surface" of the Chinese state by preventing ethnic and religious differences from developing into autonomous political identities capable of connecting with transnational networks. Its provisions concerning national identity, language, religion, social integration, online activity, foreign interference, and organizations operating outside China suggest that the*

boundaries of national security are being conceived increasingly in cognitive and networked rather than exclusively territorial terms.

The experience of Uyghur fighters in Syria illustrates why such vulnerabilities matter. The emergence of a transnational Uyghur militant constituency with combat experience, external networks, and potential integration into state structures demonstrates how an identity-based conflict originating inside one state can acquire strategic relevance far beyond its borders. Syria therefore represents not simply a Middle Eastern case, but an interface between identity, armed networks, state formation, and great-power competition.

The same network logic can be observed in the evolving strategic role of Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Central Asia. The August 2026 Makkah Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan illustrates the emergence of security arrangements that do not fit neatly into a binary China–United States framework. Pakistan in particular demonstrates the growing importance of the "hinge state": an actor whose strategic value derives precisely from its ability to participate simultaneously in multiple overlapping networks. CPEC 2.0, Turkey's NATO membership and regional autonomy, Saudi Arabia's financial and energy centrality, and Central Asia's geographical position all point toward an increasingly interconnected Eurasian strategic environment.

The central argument is therefore that the decisive competition is taking place at the interfaces between networks and identities. China's response is increasingly characterized by the construction of a stronger internal cognitive and institutional "fortress," while the United States and its partners rely more heavily on the multiplication of external connections, security partnerships, technological links, and strategic nodes. Neither model is complete in itself. The fundamental question is which architecture can transform Eurasia's growing complexity into strategic resilience.

The issue is consequently not simply who will "control" Eurasia, but who will shape the conditions under which Eurasia is connected. The emerging contest is less a war to conquer Eurasia than a struggle to determine how Eurasia will be connected.

There comes a moment in the history…

There comes a moment in the history of international relations when one realizes that events that seemed unrelated are no longer so. A law passed in Beijing, the fate of several thousand foreign fighters in Syria, the consolidation of the new leadership in Damascus, Turkey's position, Pakistan's renewed centrality, a defense agreement signed in Mecca between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, and even a seemingly off-the-cuff remark posted by Donald Trump on his social media account all begin to form a pattern.

Not necessarily a fully formed picture, not necessarily the result of a unified plan devised in a secret room, but a picture in which the moves of different actors ultimately impact the same strategic space. This, in my view, is the starting point for understanding what is happening in Western and Central Eurasia.

The competition between China and the West is no longer unfolding exclusively on the traditional grounds of military power, trade, energy, or technology. It is increasingly evident that this competition involves the ability of states to make their societies resilient to external political penetration and, at the same time, the ability of competing powers to build networks through which to influence, connect, or shape their adversary's peripheral spaces.

It is a competition that thus has two seemingly opposing yet perfectly complementary directions: on the one hand, the fortress; on the other, the network.

Beijing appears committed to making its internal sphere increasingly less vulnerable to the politicization of identity differences; Washington and its partners, without necessarily pursuing a rigidly anti-Chinese strategy, seem instead interested in keeping the Eurasian peripheries open and interconnected through a variety of political, military, economic, and cultural relationships.

It is within this dialectic that the new Law of the People's Republic of China on Promoting the Unity and Progress of Nationalities, which took effect on July 1, 2026, takes on a significance that goes far beyond its official title. The law, approved on March 12 by the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress, consists of 65 articles organized into seven chapters and centers on the construction of the "sense of community of the Chinese nation," the 中华民族共同体意识.

The first temptation, when faced with this measure, is to immediately categorize it as part of the traditional policies of minority assimilation. This interpretation cannot be dismissed and, indeed, finds concrete support in the text itself. In fact, the law strengthens the role of the common national language, establishes that in educational institutions ***Putonghua*** and standard Chinese characters shall be the primary means of instruction, emphasizes a shared historical and cultural narrative, promotes the building of communities characterized by what the text defines as "comprehensive" integration, and assigns the state a highly pervasive role in shaping national identity.

Critics of the law, including experts and human rights organizations, have interpreted these provisions as a formalization of existing assimilationist policies, with particular reference to Uyghurs and Tibetans. But stopping there means missing a crucial part of the issue. Because the law does not deal solely with culture, language, or interethnic harmony. It also addresses national security, foreign interference, religion, human rights used as a pretext, content disseminated online, organizations based outside China, and legal liabilities that may extend beyond national territory.

Article 10, in particular, explicitly places national unity within the context of defending the sovereignty, security, and development interests of the People's Republic and affirms the need to oppose activities of denigration, containment, repression, infiltration, and sabotage carried out under the pretext of ethnicity, religion, or human rights. ***Article 31***, on the other hand, brings the issue directly into the digital realm, imposing obligations on network operators to prevent, remove, and report content capable of fueling hatred and ethnic discrimination. The law, therefore, is not merely a law concerning minorities. It is also a law on the state's resilience in the face of the politicization of differences. And it is precisely this aspect that allows us to view it through the lens of cognitive warfare.

The concept of cognitive warfare is often used too broadly, to the point of becoming synonymous with any form of propaganda or disinformation. This is a mistake. If we want to use it seriously, we must understand cognitive warfare to mean something more precise: the ability to influence the processes through which a community perceives itself, identifies its adversary, interprets events, attributes legitimacy to institutions, and decides how to react. In this sense, cognitive warfare does not necessarily need to convince a population that a particular claim is true.

It may be enough to make them lose confidence in their collective identity, their leadership, their institutions, or the possibility of coexisting with other groups. The rift itself is already a weapon. It is not necessarily necessary to create it; amplifying it may be enough.

A recent academic definition of cognitive warfare emphasizes precisely the need to distinguish the cognitive domain from simple information warfare and to consider the interaction between attack and defense within decision-making processes. And this is precisely where the Chinese law becomes interesting: it seems to be based on the assumption that an ethnic or religious difference, if allowed to evolve into a separate political identity linked to external networks, can become a strategic vulnerability.

This does not mean that every minority is considered a threat. It implies something more sophisticated and, at the same time, more disturbing: the possibility that a social difference could be transformed into a political rift is treated as a national security issue. To understand this logic, we must therefore view China not as an abstract entity, but as a state with an extraordinarily sensitive geographical periphery. Xinjiang is not simply the territory where the majority of Uyghurs live. It is the great Chinese wedge that juts into Central Asia, borders numerous states, and constitutes one of the key land corridors connecting China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and—via additional corridors—Europe.

It is a region where the ethnic dimension overlaps with the religious, territorial, commercial, and strategic dimensions. It is also one of the areas through which China has sought to transform its geographical position into an infrastructural advantage via the Belt and Road Initiative. It is therefore not surprising that Beijing views the stability of Xinjiang in terms that cannot be exclusively administrative.

A social crisis in Xinjiang would not necessarily remain confined to Xinjiang. It could have Central Asian, Islamic, diasporic, digital, and international dimensions. It is this overlap of levels that makes the Uyghur issue so sensitive for Beijing and, at the same time, so interesting for those who study cognitive warfare.

The 2026 law specifically addresses this overlap. The construction of a sense of the Chinese national community is not simply a call for patriotism. It is the construction of a national identity that takes precedence over ethnic identities.

This is a fundamental point. The strategic question facing a state like China is not merely whether a Uyghur, Tibetan, or Mongolian citizen can retain certain cultural characteristics. The question, from a security perspective, is which identity is activated in times of crisis. If the individual perceives their ethnic affiliation as a component of their national identity, the state has a framework for integration. If, on the other hand, that sense of belonging can be reinterpreted as an alternative political allegiance, the problem changes radically. Identity becomes mobilizable.

And a mobilizable identity can be linked to a diaspora, a religious organization, a political movement, a digital network, or, in the most extreme cases, an armed group located outside national borders.

This is where the Syrian issue comes into our reasoning. And here we must be extremely precise, because precision is what distinguishes a serious geopolitical analysis from the construction of a compelling but unprovable narrative.

In June 2025, Reuters reported that the United States had given conditional approval to the new Syrian leadership's plan to integrate approximately 3,500 former foreign jihadist fighters—predominantly Uyghurs from China and neighboring countries—into the national army as part of a new 84th Division. The reasoning expressed by U.S. envoy Thomas Barrack was pragmatic: it would be preferable to keep those fighters within a state-run program, under control and with transparency, rather than leave them outside and thus potentially available to organizations such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

The issue is extraordinarily important because it highlights a potential divergence between two approaches to security. Washington may view the integration of foreign fighters as a tool for stabilization and containment. Beijing, on the other hand, may view the same phenomenon through a completely different lens: that of the survival of a transnational ethnic-religious network capable of acquiring military experience, political legitimacy, and ultimately access to a state apparatus.

We must not make the mistake of interpreting this difference in perception as evidence of a Western strategy deliberately directed against China. We have no evidence of this. But it would be equally naive to ignore the strategic significance of the phenomenon.

The Syrian conflict has demonstrated that a militant Uyghur component can survive outside Chinese territory, insert itself into a civil conflict, gain military experience, establish relationships with other armed groups, and—at least according to the 2025 plan—ultimately be incorporated into a new national army.

The problem for Beijing is therefore not necessarily that Washington wants to "use the Uyghurs." The problem is that the international system can spontaneously produce

situations in which an identity-based fracture within China becomes a strategic resource available to outside actors. And it is precisely this kind of possibility that the new law seeks to reduce. After all, this is a strategy that the West has used extensively throughout its history.

Consider, for example, ***the role played by Catholic religious penetration in specific geographical areas,*** such as parts of Africa and Indochina, where, once a religious constituency had been established, threats against it—perhaps in response to Catholic interference in the governance of the region—could cause the declared desire of Western powers to protect their local co-religionists to become a justification for the deployment of troops whose broader, less openly stated purpose was the political and territorial colonization of the region.

The point is not to claim that missionaries were necessarily acting as conscious agents of imperial expansion, nor that every episode of religious persecution was deliberately manufactured in order to provide a pretext for military intervention.

The historical mechanism is more subtle than that. Religious communities could develop independently of imperial policy, while Western governments could subsequently transform the protection of those communities into an instrument of diplomatic pressure, military intervention, and ultimately political and economic penetration.

French Indochina provides one of the clearest examples. French military and political intervention in the region was repeatedly justified, among other things, by the need to protect Catholic missionaries and Christian populations. What began as a declared effort to defend religious interests gradually became something much larger: the occupation of territories, the establishment of colonial administrations, and eventually the creation of French Indochina. In China, the mechanism was even more explicit.
France established a religious protectorate over Catholic missions and presented itself as the protector of Catholics throughout the country. That system became deeply intertwined with France’s broader political and economic ambitions in China and was formalized through the unequal treaty system. The protection of missionaries therefore ceased to be merely a religious question. It became a channel through which a European power acquired a recognized basis for intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

This historical pattern is important because it reveals something that is often overlooked when analyzing contemporary forms of geopolitical competition: ***the strategic value of an identity does not necessarily depend on who created it***. A community may exist for entirely legitimate historical, cultural, linguistic, or religious reasons. But once that community becomes politically mobilized, connected to actors outside the state, or perceived as being under threat, it can become the object of international protection.

At that point, what was initially an internal social difference can be transformed into an international political issue. And once an internal issue becomes internationalized, the sovereignty of the state concerned begins to encounter a new form of pressure.

The sequence is therefore relatively straightforward: a social or religious distinction produces a community; the community develops a distinct identity; an external actor begins to claim an interest in protecting that identity; disputes involving that community become internationalized; and the resulting network creates a potential channel for political, diplomatic, economic, or military intervention.

This does not require a single conspiracy or a centrally coordinated plan. It can emerge organically from the interaction of missionaries, local elites, foreign governments, humanitarian organizations, media, diaspora networks, and strategic interests. That is precisely what makes the mechanism so difficult to neutralize once it has fully developed.

In the twenty-first century, the instruments have obviously changed. The missionary may be replaced by an NGO, a human-rights organization, a media network, a think tank, a diaspora organization, a digital platform, or an international institution. The gunboat may be replaced by sanctions, diplomatic isolation, legal proceedings, information operations, financial restrictions, military assistance to local partners, or political recognition. But the underlying strategic logic can remain surprisingly similar: an internal identity issue becomes externalized; externalization creates a legitimate or apparently legitimate reason for outside involvement; and outside involvement increases the strategic importance of the identity cleavage itself.

This is where the concept of cognitive warfare becomes relevant.

Modern cognitive warfare does not necessarily need to invent a social fracture. In many cases, the most effective strategy is to identify an existing difference, amplify its political significance, connect it to a broader international narrative, and transform it into a source of pressure on the target state.

The objective is not necessarily to create a separatist movement from scratch. It may simply be to ensure that, when a crisis occurs, there is already an identity-based network capable of translating a domestic dispute into an international cause.

Seen from this perspective, the Chinese approach becomes easier to understand. Beijing is attempting to reduce what could be described as the "***attack surface***" of the Chinese state at the level of collective identity.

The emphasis on a shared Chinese national identity, a common national language, integrated education, interethnic mobility, mixed residential communities, common cultural and media narratives, and the promotion of interaction among ethnic groups can therefore be read not merely as a social-engineering project, but also as a form of ***strategic prevention***.

The objective is to make it more difficult for an external actor to take an existing ethnic distinction and transform it into a politically autonomous identity with transnational connections.

This is particularly significant in the case of Xinjiang. The region, as we have reported above, is not simply another administrative territory on China's periphery. It occupies a strategic position linking China to Central Asia and, through Central Asian networks, to the broader Eurasian space. It sits close to the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, borders several states with their own complex ethnic and religious dynamics, and occupies a critical position in China's westward economic and strategic projection.

An identity-based movement in Xinjiang would therefore not remain purely a domestic Chinese issue. Under the right—or rather, the wrong—international circumstances, it could become connected to religious networks, diaspora organizations, political movements, foreign intelligence interests, militant organizations, or competing geopolitical projects.

This is why the language of the new law matters. Its provisions concerning education, the national language, media and the internet, interethnic interaction, population mobility, urban integration, religious affairs, and even conduct outside China's territory can be interpreted as components of a broader effort to prevent ethnic identity from becoming detached from the overarching Chinese national identity. ***Beijing is not merely attempting to regulate what ethnic groups are allowed to do. It is attempting to define the framework within which ethnic differences can exist without becoming alternative political identities***.

And this brings us back to the Uyghurs in Syria.

The problem from Beijing's perspective is not simply the existence of several thousand Uyghur fighters in Syria, nor even their incorporation into the new Syrian military structure. The deeper problem is the emergence of a transnational Uyghur political and military constituency outside Chinese territory. Once such a constituency exists, it can acquire relationships with governments, armed groups, intelligence services, religious networks, diaspora organizations, and international institutions. It becomes something qualitatively different from an ethnic minority living inside China. It becomes an external node in a potentially transnational political network.

That distinction is crucial. A domestic ethnic group can be governed through the institutions of the state. A transnational political constituency is much harder to contain because its political environment is no longer exclusively determined by the state in which its members reside. Its grievances can be internationalized. Its representatives can seek foreign patrons. Its fighters can acquire military experience. Its organizations can develop external sources of financing and political legitimacy. Its cause can be inserted into broader narratives concerning human rights, religion, self-determination, or resistance.

At that point, the strategic problem changes completely. The question is no longer whether China can manage an internal ethnic issue. The question becomes whether an internal ethnic identity can acquire enough external infrastructure to become a geopolitical instrument.

This is precisely why the Chinese law should not be read only through the conventional domestic-policy lens. Its deeper logic may be preventive. It seeks to ensure that ethnic differences remain embedded within a single political identity before they can be transformed into autonomous political identities capable of being internationalized. In other words, Beijing is attempting to close the door before an external actor has a reason—or an opportunity—to walk through it.

The historical examples discussed above are therefore not simply analogies. They illustrate a structural possibility that remains relevant even though the instruments of power have changed. In the nineteenth century, religious protection could become a mechanism of imperial penetration. In the twenty-first century, identity protection, human-rights advocacy, humanitarian intervention, diaspora politics, information warfare, and transnational security networks can potentially perform some of the same strategic functions.

The political vocabulary is different. The institutions are different. The technologies are different. But the underlying problem remains recognizable: ***who gets to define when an internal identity issue becomes an international concern?***

For Beijing, the answer is increasingly clear: ideally, no one outside China should be given that opportunity in the first place

If this is indeed the case, then China's national unity law would not simply be a response to a threat that has already emerged. It would be a preventive response to the possibility that such a threat might emerge. And it is precisely from this perspective that the Chinese text deserves, paradoxically, to be studied much more seriously in the West. Not necessarily in order to import its political model or its methods of implementation, but to examine the strategic logic behind it: if an identity-based fracture can, once internationalized, become a lever in the hands of external actors, then preventing social fragmentation should be regarded as a matter of national security before it becomes a matter of public order.

This reasoning applies to Europe as well. To speak seriously about the integration of Muslim communities in Europe cannot mean merely ensuring their presence within the societies in which they live or responding to the most visible manifestations of radicalization. It should also mean building, well before any crisis emerges, a sufficiently strong common civic and political identity to prevent religious, cultural, or communal differences from evolving into transnational political identities that can be mobilized, protected, or instrumentalized by external actors.

In this sense, what the West risks suffering through excessive short-sightedness is precisely what Beijing appears to have understood in advance: ***a state's strategic vulnerabilities do not necessarily begin when a threat arrives from outside; they can begin much earlier, when an internal fracture becomes potentially usable from the outside.***

And perhaps this is the most uncomfortable lesson contained in China's new law. What matters is not only how a state responds to identity-based crises once they erupt. What matters even more is how much it is willing to do, before they erupt, to prevent them from becoming geopolitical crises in the first place.

This story takes on even greater significance when we consider the nature of the new Syria. Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, came to power after the fall of Bashar al-Assad and faced the challenge of transforming a constellation of armed groups into a state structure. The integration of foreign fighters was therefore not merely a military issue: it was a matter of state-building. Some fighters from Central Asia and other countries had been in Syria for years and had built their own military and social structures.

Their incorporation into the state can therefore be seen as an attempt to transform a potentially destabilizing force into a controllable component of the institutional order. From a Western perspective, this may appear to be a classic state-building problem. From a Chinese perspective, however, it appears to be something closer to a problem of a securitized diaspora: a population with a specific ethnic, religious, and political identity, originating from Chinese territory, that develops military capabilities outside of China and is ultimately absorbed into the structures of a foreign state.

And it is precisely here that the question of cognitive warfare becomes unavoidable. A power does not necessarily have to create a separatist movement. It may be sufficient for a movement to exist and for it to have an international environment in which to find legitimacy, funding, training, refuge, communication, or recognition. After all, this is, mutatis mutandis, the fertile ground upon which the foundations of past proxy wars—as well as recent ones—rest.

Cognitive warfare, in fact, precedes conventional warfare. It operates on the definition of the problem. Who is the victim? Who is the oppressor? Which identity must be defended? What memory must be passed down? Which language should be used? Which authority is legitimate? Once these questions are politicized, cultural differences can become a political platform.

This is why the provisions of Chinese law concerning education, language, the media, the family, and the internet have a strategic importance that risks being underestimated if considered in isolation. Taken together, they constitute a system designed to prevent the formation of national identity from being left entirely to autonomous social forces or, worse, to transnational networks.

In this context, language is much more than a tool for communication. It is a cognitive infrastructure.

Whoever controls the language of schooling controls a significant part of how the next generation accesses history, literature, memory, and political discourse. The decision to strengthen the role of Standard Mandarin is therefore not merely an administrative choice. It is also a choice in favor of integration.

And that is precisely why it is one of the most controversial parts of the law. Critical observers argue that the promotion of Mandarin, combined with the redefinition of minority cultures as components of the broader Chinese culture, may accelerate the loss of cultural and linguistic autonomy. From the perspective of national security, however, the same measure can be interpreted as an attempt to create a common national cognitive sphere in which language cannot become a vehicle for political separation.

This is a logic we can understand even outside the Chinese context: nation-states have historically used schools, language, military service, administration, and the media to build a common identity. What sets China apart is the depth to which this process is integrated into a political structure dominated by the Communist Party and the resulting narrowing of the space in which minority identities can develop autonomously.

The same applies to historical memory.

The law mandates education on the history of the Communist Party, the People's Republic, reform and opening-up, and the development of the Chinese nation. Once again, this is not merely a pedagogical detail.

Memory is one of the fundamental tools of cognitive warfare because it determines who we have been, which traumas we acknowledge, which victories we celebrate, and which conflicts we still consider unresolved. A community that possesses a distinct historical memory also has the ability to construct a distinct political narrative. Beijing therefore appears to be pursuing a specific strategy: transforming the diverse ethnic memories into chapters of a shared national memory. Uyghur, Tibetan, or Mongolian culture need not necessarily disappear; however, it must be brought back into the broader narrative of Chinese culture. This is where the fundamental tension of the law lies: integration and assimilation can be perceived as one and the same when those in power unilaterally decide what constitutes the common culture and what the limits of particular identities are.

The second major concept is that of the "***comprehensive integration***" of communities. Here, too, the wording deserves attention. The law promotes mobility, educational exchanges, the distribution of economic activities, urban coexistence, interregional relations, and the integration of populations into shared social structures.

From a security perspective, the logic is intuitive. A population that is geographically isolated, linguistically distinct, and socially homogeneous can more easily build an autonomous network. A population embedded in much broader social networks, on the other hand, exhibits greater interdependence.

This reduces the possibility of rapid mobilization along ethnic lines. Once again, however, what the state perceives as resilience may be seen by the minority as a loss of autonomy. The issue, therefore, is not to determine which of the two interpretations is "true." Both can be true at the same time. A policy can increase the state's security while simultaneously restricting the space for cultural autonomy.

And it is precisely this ambivalence that makes the law politically significant.

China seems to have realized that in the 21st century, control over territory is not enough. One must also control the meaning of the territory. Xinjiang must not only be physically Chinese; it must be cognitively Chinese. The difference is enormous. Physical control can be maintained through the police, the military, and the administration. Cognitive control requires education, language, culture, communication, memory, and social integration. And this is why the measure appears to be much broader than a simple law on minorities.

At this point, the second key player in our story appears: Pakistan. And this is where the Eurasian geopolitical landscape begins to get really interesting.

For decades, Pakistan has been considered one of China's key strategic partners. It is not merely an economic relationship. Islamabad has repeatedly described its relationship with Beijing as an "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership," and in May 2026, the Pakistani government once again defined its relationship with China as a cornerstone of its foreign policy.

That same month, during Shehbaz Sharif's visit to Beijing, China and Pakistan reaffirmed the role of the CPEC and agreed to develop a "2.0" version of it, including the enhancement of the Port of Gwadar and the Khunjerab Pass as connectivity hubs. Even more significant is what happened a few days after the Mecca Pact: on August 12, Islamabad and Beijing discussed a new political and institutional dimension to CPEC cooperation, with what the Pakistani government termed the "Five Political Corridors" intended to complement CPEC 2.0.

This fact is crucial because it precludes a simplistic interpretation. If anyone were to argue that Pakistan, through the Mecca Agreement, has simply "switched from China to the United States," the facts would immediately disprove that claim. That did not happen. And it probably won't happen. Pakistan has no interest in making a definitive choice between Washington and Beijing. Its strength stems precisely from its ability to be indispensable to both. It is a classic "hinge state."

And this is where contemporary geopolitics becomes far more sophisticated than the old logic of blocs. Pakistan can simultaneously be a strategic partner of China, a dialogue partner of the United States, a member of a security framework with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and a geographical gateway to Central Asia. There is no contradiction. There is a strategy to maximize geopolitical value.

And that is precisely why the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement of August 7, 2026, deserves special attention.

The agreement, signed in Mecca by Mohammed bin Salman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Shehbaz Sharif, stipulates that an armed attack against any one of the three states must be considered an attack against all of them. The official Saudi statement refers to strengthening joint deterrence and developing all forms of cooperation in the defense sector. In the days that followed, Ankara clarified that the agreement should be implemented through permanent political and military mechanisms, involving the defense and foreign ministers and the top leadership of the armed forces, as well as joint land, naval, and air exercises; cooperation in air defense, unmanned systems, electronic warfare, and artificial intelligence; and the joint development and production of defense technologies. And on August 31, the body established under the agreement held its first political and strategic defense meeting in Istanbul with ministers and military leaders from the three countries.

This is the part that changes he initial interpretation offered by many observers. On August 7, the agreement could still have been dismissed as a political gesture, a declaration of solidarity among three Muslim powers concerned about regional instability. By September, that is no longer sufficient.

The agreement is beginning to produce institutions, coordination mechanisms, and operational programs. We still do not know whether it will become a genuine military alliance in any meaningful sense comparable to NATO. We do not know whether the mutual-defense provision will ever be put to the test by a real crisis. We do not even know whether the project will be able to overcome the enormous strategic differences between Ankara, Islamabad, and Riyadh. But the transition from declaration to institutional construction has already taken place.

And this is where Donald Trump comes in. His reaction was, in my view, one of the most underestimated elements of the entire story. On August 16, the U.S. president wrote that he was “very happy” about the signing of the agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, adding that it showed how the Middle East was finally learning to defend itself in a more meaningful way and describing it as a “big, bold, and important first step.”

The statement—assuming, of course, that it was not simply dictated by the immediate necessity of making the best of an unwelcome development—deserves to be taken seriously. Not because it proves the existence of an American plan behind the agreement, which we cannot claim, but because it reveals a conception of the distribution of the strategic burden that is entirely consistent with Trump’s broader philosophy: allies should assume a greater share of responsibility for their own security. An agreement that allows regional states to build autonomous capabilities can therefore be perceived in Washington not as a loss, but as a form of strategic delegation.

And this is precisely where our initial intuition becomes particularly interesting. If all three signatories have significant relationships with the United States, but none of them wants to depend exclusively on Washington, the agreement may become something very different from a “Western” alliance aligned with Trump. It could become an autonomous regional structure that is nevertheless—not for now—hostile to American interests. That is a fundamental distinction. The United States does not necessarily need to command a network in order to benefit from it. Washington can benefit simply from the fact that such a network prevents another power from monopolizing the regional system.

What is striking, however, is that the possibility that the ultimate outcome might be the emergence of a regional structure with potentially global strategic consequences does not appear to have been seriously incorporated into this reading. Beijing, by contrast, may have recognized precisely this possibility, even if its official response to the August 7 agreement was cautious rather than openly confrontational. The Chinese leadership has repeatedly emphasized the need for regional countries to take greater responsibility for their own security and to reshape the Middle East's security architecture without external domination. From this perspective, a genuinely autonomous regional security structure is not necessarily something China would oppose—but neither is it necessarily something Beijing would regard as strategically neutral.

This is perhaps the deeper point. The contemporary competition is becoming less and less a matter of rigid blocs and more and more a matter of strategic ecosystems. States can cooperate with Washington while simultaneously developing independent security structures. They can deepen their relations with Beijing while maintaining defense partnerships with the United States. They can participate in multiple overlapping networks without formally joining any single camp.
And we have to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that Beijing appears to have understood this transformation more deeply than Washington.

This is not entirely without historical precedent.

There is, in fact, a particularly revealing example in Europe itself. The unification of Italy was not achieved by the Kingdom of Sardinia simply choosing a camp and subordinating itself to one of the great powers of the time. Quite the opposite. The House of Savoy, and above all Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, played an extraordinarily sophisticated diplomatic game among the major powers of nineteenth-century Europe, exploiting their rivalries and shifting interests in order to advance a distinctly Piedmontese—and ultimately Italian—strategic project.

What later became known as Cavour's "artichoke strategy" was based, in essence, on precisely this logic: rather than attempting to defeat every opponent simultaneously, to peel away the layers one by one, neutralizing or co-opting potential adversaries whenever possible and creating, step by step, the conditions necessary for the next move. Piedmont did not possess the military or economic power to impose Italian unification on Europe. It therefore had to construct an environment in which the interests of the great powers could, at least temporarily, be aligned with its own.

Cavour understood something that remains highly relevant today: a smaller power does not necessarily increase its strategic autonomy by isolating itself from competing great powers. It can sometimes increase that autonomy by maintaining relationships with several of them simultaneously, while ensuring that none acquires sufficient influence to dictate the terms of the entire system. **The art lies not in choosing a permanent patron, but in turning the competition among patrons into strategic room for maneuver.**

Seen in this light, the Mecca Agreement becomes even more interesting. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan are not simply forming a new bloc. They are potentially constructing a regional layer of strategic autonomy while maintaining significant relationships with Washington, Beijing, and other external powers. Whether this will ultimately succeed is another question. But the logic is recognizable: rather than becoming an extension of one great power, create a structure whose very existence increases the room for maneuver of its members.

The historical analogy should not be pushed too far. Nineteenth-century Piedmont was pursuing the specific objective of Italian unification, while today's regional powers operate in a vastly more complex international environment. Yet the underlying strategic principle remains remarkably familiar: ***autonomy does not necessarily mean independence from all external powers; sometimes it means having enough relationships with competing powers that no single one can make itself indispensable.***

This is precisely why the emerging strategic landscape cannot be adequately described through the old language of blocs. What is being constructed today is increasingly a system of overlapping relationships, institutions, defense arrangements, economic corridors, technological partnerships, and diplomatic understandings. The power that understands how to navigate this ecosystem most effectively may ultimately exercise greater influence than the power that simply possesses the largest military alliance.

And this, once again, brings us back to the difference between Washington and Beijing. The United States has traditionally been extraordinarily effective at building alliances. China increasingly appears to be thinking in terms of something broader: how to shape the environment in which alliances, partnerships, regional institutions, economic dependencies, and security arrangements interact. The distinction may prove decisive. Because in an international system increasingly organized around strategic ecosystems rather than rigid blocs, the winner may not be the power with the most allies, but the power that best understands how the networks connecting those allies actually work.

Pakistan is the point where this dynamic becomes even more evident. If Islamabad were to remain exclusively within China's sphere of influence, Beijing would have extraordinary strategic depth along the Xinjiang–Pakistan–Indian Ocean axis. But if Islamabad simultaneously maintains its relationship with Beijing and builds a security framework with Ankara and Riyadh, the situation changes. This does not mean that China loses Pakistan. It means that Pakistan becomes a hub where multiple networks converge. And a multicentric hub is much more difficult to control. China continues to have CPEC, Gwadar, Khunjerab, and its strategic partnership with Islamabad; but it can no longer take for granted that the political-military system in which Pakistan is embedded is exclusively oriented toward Beijing. Islamabad itself, after all, has every interest in maintaining this structural ambiguity.

The issue becomes even more interesting when we look at Turkey. Ankara is simultaneously a NATO member, an autonomous regional power, a military actor with an increasingly important defense industry, and a country with deep historical and linguistic ties to Central Asia. Turkey is therefore not simply an "American ally." It is a power that uses its NATO membership as one of the tools of its strategic autonomy. Its participation in the Mecca agreement can be interpreted in the same way: not necessarily as a return to the American umbrella, but as an attempt to build a system in which Turkey itself becomes one of the region's security providers. It is significant that Ankara has insisted that the pact does not replace existing alliances and may be extended to other countries, with Egypt cited as a possible candidate.

This brings us back to the central concept of this essay: the network viewed and analyzed in light of a proper and necessary assessment of the risks associated with it, as implied by the reading that emerges between the lines of the text of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Promoting the Unity and Progress of Nationalities.

China is building physical infrastructure across Eurasia. Railways, ports, highways, pipelines, industrial zones, telecommunications. The West—and more specifically, the United States along with its partners—has a different network: alliances, intelligence, financial systems, military interoperability, technologies, bases, security agreements, and relationships with political elites. The competition is not simply about who controls more infrastructure. It is about which network is capable of remaining operational when a crisis severs connections.

China has built a significant part of its Eurasian strategy on connectivity. Pakistan is one of the central points of this architecture. Xinjiang is China's entry point. Gwadar is one of the maritime gateways. Central Asia is the vast intermediate space. The Middle East is simultaneously a market, an energy source, a logistics hub, and a political arena. Turkey represents one of the possible bridges to Europe. From this perspective, the Mecca Agreement takes on a different meaning: not because it was designed to "close off" the BRI, but because it creates a new security network precisely **in a geographic area where China has invested heavily to transform economic connectivity into strategic influence.**

It is important to emphasize that ***this interpretation is not necessarily hostile toward China*** from the signatories' perspective.

The paradox is that a regional security agreement can be both beneficial to Beijing and problematic for Beijing at the same time. Beneficial because it reduces the risk of destabilization in an area that is crucial for Chinese trade and infrastructure. Problematic because it creates a military framework in which China does not occupy a central position.

This ambivalence has been noted by several analysts. Some interpretations have emphasized that the pact could even offer opportunities to Beijing, particularly through military cooperation, the sale of defense systems, and defense diplomacy; others have highlighted the risk that its eventual evolution into a more cohesive bloc could reduce China's room for maneuver.

And here lies one of the most interesting strategic ironies of the moment.

For years, China has built its international narrative on the principle that regional states must be masters of their own destiny and that external powers should not impose security architectures. When three Muslim regional powers independently establish a security framework, Beijing cannot simply condemn it without contradicting part of its own narrative. It is therefore not surprising that Xinhua presented the agreement in relatively neutral terms, while Chinese diplomacy continues to uphold the principle of regional security managed by Middle Eastern actors themselves.

China's position became even more interesting a few days ago. During his visit to Egypt on September 2, Xi Jinping argued that Middle Eastern countries must be "masters of their own affairs," opposing external interference and proposing a new regional security architecture based on common security. Beijing also emphasized the security of maritime routes, economic development, and the need for greater regional cooperation. It is hard not to read this as relevant to the new strategic environment that has emerged since August 7.

But once again, we must avoid jumping to conclusions: we do not need to prove that Xi "responded" to the pact to recognize that the new regional order is now part of the context in which Chinese policy is formulated.

The question then becomes: What does Beijing really want to achieve?

The answer might be very different from what we imagine. It is not necessarily to prevent the formation of regional alliances. It is not necessarily about bringing Pakistan back into an exclusive Chinese orbit. Rather, it is ***to prevent a network of regional alliances from transforming into a political infrastructure capable of exploiting China's internal vulnerabilities. And this is where the law on ethnic unity returns to the center of our analysis.***

The fortress and the network, in fact, are two sides of the same coin. An external network becomes strategically dangerous when it manages to connect to an internal fracture. An internal fortress becomes inadequate when its adversary manages to build a network capable of circumventing it.

Strategic competition therefore consists of controlling these interfaces. ***The decisive strategic competition is taking place at the interfaces between networks and identities. China seeks to make the interface between minorities, the diaspora, and foreign actors more difficult.*** Rival powers seek—whether consciously or not—to keep the interfaces between Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Mediterranean open.

From this perspective, ***Article 10*** of Chinese law takes on an almost paradigmatic significance.

It does not simply address secession or terrorism, or religious extremism.It places ethnicity, religion, and human rights in the same semantic field as external interference. This approach can be strongly criticized in terms of rights and freedoms, and in fact has been criticized by international organizations and Western governments. The United States and the European Union have expressed concern above all about the law's extraterritorial scope, arguing that it could be used against individuals and organizations outside China.

But it is precisely these criticisms that allow us to better understand the Chinese logic: Beijing no longer views ethnic security as an issue confined within its own borders. It considers it part of a transnational ecosystem.

And this is what makes the concept of diaspora strategically significant.

For decades, the diaspora has been studied primarily through the lenses of migration, remittances, and cultural identity. In the 21st century, it can also become a political network. A diaspora can serve as an economic and cultural bridge; but it can also function as a channel for financing, communication, mobilization, or lobbying. In the face of identity conflicts, it can become a force multiplier. China clearly seeks to limit this possibility. ***The extraterritorial application of the law must therefore also be seen as an attempt to prevent Chinese territory from extending beyond the borders of the People's Republic: Beijing seems to view its own identity security as something that can be threatened even abroad.***

This is a conceptual shift of enormous importance.

The 20th-century state primarily defended its own territory. The 21st-century state must also protect the identity networks on which political cohesion increasingly depends..

And it does so in two ways:

- ***First: by preventing internal identities from becoming politically fragmented.***
- ***Second: by preventing external communities from becoming platforms for mobilization against the state.***

In this sense, the Chinese law represents a further step toward a conception of sovereignty that is no longer exclusively territorial but also cognitive.

Of course, this strategy—the ***Fortress Strategy***—poses enormous risks. The first is that it may produce the opposite effect. If a state attempts to neutralize a particular identity through a dominant national identity, it may end up reinforcing the very sense of exclusion it sought to eliminate. If a minority perceives its language as threatened, the language may become more political, not less so. If a community perceives its memory as being censored, that memory can become a tool of resistance. If digital networks are heavily controlled, underground platforms may become more important. In other words, cognitive hardening can either increase resilience or deepen the divide. It depends on the perceived legitimacy of the state.

This is the main weakness of the Fortress Strategy.

A society is not a firewall. Filtering content alone is not enough to eliminate cognitive vulnerabilities. People do not react solely to external propaganda; they react to their own daily experiences. If there is a genuine perception of discrimination, control, or cultural loss, no information apparatus can erase it indefinitely. Cognitive warfare, in fact, works only when it finds a social breeding ground.

External information can amplify a divide, but it rarely creates one out of thin air. This is why a policy of internal cohesion must also be credible from a material standpoint. And this is precisely why the Chinese law devotes a considerable portion of its text to economic development, the reduction of inequalities, public services, infrastructure, and shared prosperity. Beijing isn't just saying, "Be Chinese." It is also saying: the national community must produce concrete and shared benefits.

Here, the law reveals a structure far more sophisticated than it might appear at first glance. ***Identity is supported by three pillars:***

- ***narrative,***
- ***integration, and***
- ***prosperity.***

Narrative fosters a sense of belonging. Integration fosters interdependence. Prosperity fosters legitimacy. If one of the three pillars fails, the structure weakens.

A population may share the same language but not feel part of the same community if it perceives an unfair distribution of resources. It may live in the same territory but not share an identity if it holds radically divergent historical memories. It may benefit from economic development but continue to feel a cultural distance if it believes its identity is being marginalized. The law seeks to address all these levels simultaneously.

And this is precisely what makes it legitimate to speak of cognitive warfare—provided it is done with caution. Not because the law is a "cognitive weapon" in the military sense of the term, but because it builds an institutional framework aimed at reducing conditions of cognitive vulnerability. It is a form of ***structural cognitive defense***. China does not limit itself to countering individual disinformation campaigns; it seeks to undermine the very ground on which such campaigns could operate.

The next question is inevitable: is the West doing anything comparable?

The answer, in theory, is yes, but in a completely different and, in some respects, considerably less effective form. The difference does not simply depend on political will, but on the very structure of Western democracies. A liberal democracy cannot construct and impose a single national narrative through the same degree of control exercised by an authoritarian state over schools, language, media, and communication. And it cannot do so without contradicting the principles of pluralism, individual freedom, and social autonomy upon which its own legitimacy rests.

But this openness is also a vulnerability. A society in which multiple narratives can compete freely is certainly freer; it is not necessarily more resistant to cognitive manipulation. When the average level of civic literacy and understanding of complex phenomena declines, when the ability to distinguish between information, propaganda, opinion, and manipulation weakens, and when cognitive biases are systematically exploited by an information environment designed to maximize attention and emotion, pluralism can turn into permeability.

This is not merely a problem affecting individuals, but one that concerns the functioning of the political system itself. An electorate that struggles to understand complex phenomena will inevitably tend, at least in part, to reward those who are capable of transforming such phenomena into simple, emotional, and immediately comprehensible narratives. Electoral incentives do the rest. A politician who communicates a complex and uncomfortable reality may be less competitive than one who offers a reassuring explanation, an elementary solution, or an easily identifiable adversary. The consequence is not necessarily that voters are “stupid” or that politicians are simply “idiots.” The problem is deeper: a system can produce, rationally and through millions of individual decisions, collectively irrational outcomes.

And this is where one of the fundamental contradictions of contemporary democracy emerges. The same freedoms that prevent the state from imposing a single narrative also allow competing narratives, transnational campaigns, ideological organizations, digital platforms, foreign actors, and identity-based networks to compete in defining reality. This does not mean that every form of external influence is cognitive warfare, nor that every transnational social movement is an instrument of a foreign power. It means, more simply, that an open society presents more interfaces through which an external actor can attempt to influence perceptions of events, identities, and political priorities.

Western democracies can therefore build networks, and the network is indeed one of the principal forms of the West’s strategic resilience. NATO, bilateral agreements, intelligence sharing, military interoperability, the defense industry, energy agreements, financial systems, and technological platforms constitute an extraordinary infrastructure of connectivity. It is not necessary for every node to belong politically to Washington. It is enough for it to be sufficiently compatible with the network to cooperate with it when necessary.

But here the limitation of the Western strategy becomes apparent. A network is resilient because it possesses many nodes and many connections; at the same time, however, every connection constitutes a potential point of entry. The more open a society is, the more difficult it becomes to control what crosses its cognitive borders without undermining the openness itself. And the more the political system depends on individuals’ ability to independently evaluate information and narratives, the more important the quality of the population’s cognitive capital becomes.

Europe is particularly significant in this respect. Its extraordinary economic, cultural, and political openness has produced one of the most interconnected spaces on the planet, but it has not always produced a corresponding capacity for cognitive defense. The growing polarization of Western societies, the speed with which digital campaigns can cross borders, the competition among identity-based narratives, and the difficulty political institutions face in distinguishing legitimate pluralism from potentially destabilizing forms of influence all demonstrate how fragile a network can become when its nodes no longer share even a minimal common basis of reality.

The demonstrations and political mobilizations connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict illustrate, regardless of the judgment one may make about the individual positions involved, how rapidly an external issue can be transferred into Western societies through digital, religious, cultural, and diasporic networks. The point is not to establish that such mobilizations are "controlled" from outside: such a claim would require specific evidence and cannot simply be assumed. The strategic point is different. A crisis originating thousands of miles away can rapidly acquire an internal political dimension, alter collective perceptions, influence electoral behavior, and create new lines of fracture within Western societies.

This dynamic should be of direct interest to anyone studying cognitive warfare. It demonstrates that an external actor does not necessarily need to control a population. It may be sufficient to gain access, directly or indirectly, to the networks through which that population interprets events. Vulnerability therefore arises not only from the existence of hostile propaganda. It also arises from the existence of a system in which an external narrative can rapidly find communities already receptive to it, adapt it, and amplify it.

This is where the difference with China becomes more interesting. Beijing seeks to reduce cognitive permeability through greater control over the national narrative and the institutions through which it is transmitted.. The West, by contrast, cannot and probably should not replicate that model. It must seek a different form of resilience: not control of the narrative, but the ability of society to recognize, compare, and independently neutralize manipulative narratives.

The problem is that this second form of resilience requires something that the first can impose from above and the second cannot: a population sufficiently competent, informed, and capable of exercising independent judgment. In a democracy, cognitive resilience cannot simply be commanded. It has to be built.

And this is precisely where the West risks confronting its own strategic paradox. China can sacrifice part of its pluralism in order to increase control over its cognitive sphere. The West can preserve pluralism, but must accept the risk of greater permeability. The first solution risks turning resilience into conformity; the second risks turning freedom into vulnerability.

The question, therefore, is not to determine which of the two models is "better" in the abstract. It is to understand which of the two is capable of transforming its structural characteristics into resilience without simultaneously turning them into a new source of vulnerability.

And this is precisely where the Western network reveals its limitation: an extremely connected network is extraordinarily difficult to break from the outside, but it can be surprisingly easy to traverse from within when its own connections are used to transfer conflicts, identities, and narratives from one node to another.

And it is ultimately reasonable to conclude that, in light of these considerations, the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement was not conceived as an Islamic NATO, nor should it necessarily be interpreted as an instrument constructed by Washington. Even if the United States played a direct or indirect role in facilitating its emergence, American initiative would have served, at most, as a catalyst for the creation of something potentially very different: not simply a pact subordinate to an external power, but an autonomous structure through which three regional powers seek to increase both their security and their room for maneuver.

After all, the available evidence suggests that the agreement is primarily the product of a convergence of interests among three regional states whose highly complementary capabilities, taken together, promise to produce a form of regional deterrence capable of reducing, at least in part, the need to rely exclusively on the security guarantees of an external power that, in the current context, has not demonstrated an ability to effectively contain the Iranian threat.

The true value of the network, however, is not simply the sum of the capabilities of its nodes. It is what happens between them. Turkey connects the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Pakistan connects South Asia, China, and the Indian Ocean. Saudi Arabia connects the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arab world. Together, they form a strategic geometry spanning some of the principal lines of communication across Eurasia. If the arrangement were to expand, for example through the inclusion of additional regional states, the strategic value of the network could increase not linearly, as each new node would create additional possible connections.

There is, however, an important qualification. In this particular case, the network is not composed of nodes that are equally exposed to external cognitive or political penetration. On the contrary, all three states possess strong state structures and significant mechanisms for controlling the flow of information, political organization, and external influence. Their societies are therefore not necessarily exposed to the same form of cognitive permeability found in Western democracies. This gives the network an important form of resilience: its nodes are, in themselves, relatively difficult to penetrate from the outside.

The vulnerability therefore shifts from the individual node to the interfaces between nodes. External narratives do not necessarily need to penetrate deeply into one of these societies in order to weaken the network. It may be enough to exploit pre-existing rivalries, divergent strategic interests, historical grievances, or competing regional ambitions in order to alter how one member perceives another. The objective would not necessarily be to break the individual states, but to prevent them from translating their complementary capabilities into durable strategic coordination. In this sense, the principal cognitive vulnerability of the network lies not within its fortresses, but in the relationships that connect them.

And it is here that the title of this essay acquires its full meaning. The Fortress and the Network are not two opposing strategies. They are two different ways of conceiving security. The fortress begins from the premise that vulnerability derives from permeability. The network begins from the premise that security derives from connectivity. China seeks to reduce the permeability of its internal space; the United States and its partners seek to increase the connectivity of their strategic ecosystems. But the Mecca Agreement suggests a more complex possibility: a network can itself be built out of relatively fortified states. In that configuration, the network gains resilience against external penetration, while simultaneously creating a new strategic vulnerability at the interfaces between its members. The decisive question is therefore not simply whether a state can defend itself from external narratives, but whether a group of states can prevent those narratives from being used to turn their differences against the network itself.

If this architecture were to function effectively, and particularly if it were to expand by incorporating additional Muslim states, both China and the United States could eventually find themselves confronting a regional structure whose strategic weight would be considerably greater than that of the three states that initially created it. Such an outcome would be paradoxical, because its emergence could be facilitated, at least indirectly, by the combination of periods of Western strategic myopia and a Chinese approach to the Global South that has sometimes underestimated the possibility that the political autonomy it encourages may eventually produce structures that are not necessarily aligned with Beijing either.

This possibility therefore deserves careful monitoring, but also something more important: an opening of strategic dialogue between Beijing and Washington precisely on the evolution of the regional security architecture. The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement should not necessarily be viewed as an immediate threat to either power. Its significance lies instead in what it could become if its logic were progressively extended. A mechanism initially created to increase the autonomy and security of three regional powers could, over time, become a broader platform for strategic coordination among a growing number of Muslim states.

This is where the old logic of the artichoke becomes relevant once again. A structure does not necessarily need to announce an ambition to become a major geopolitical bloc. It can expand incrementally, absorbing one layer of connectivity after another, until the accumulated effect produces something qualitatively different from the original arrangement. If that process were allowed to develop without adequate diplomatic engagement, the result could be a regional architecture whose strategic consequences would be difficult for both Washington and Beijing to control.

The point, therefore, is not that the Mecca Agreement is destined to become an independent geopolitical pole, still less that it represents an emerging anti-Western or anti-Chinese alliance. The point is that it creates a mechanism through which such a possibility could become progressively more plausible. And precisely because its emergence would not necessarily depend on the strategic design of either Washington or Beijing, both powers would have an interest in understanding its evolution before the network acquires a degree of institutional and political momentum that becomes difficult to reverse.

The point at which these two strategies can come into direct competition is Central Asia. It is the region that simultaneously separates and connects China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Middle East. It is a region in which China has invested enormously, but where Turkey has gradually developed an increasingly significant cultural and political presence through the Turkic-speaking world. It is also a region in which Pakistan is seeking to expand its economic access, while the United States and Europe retain energy and logistical interests. And it is the region in which the Uyghur question acquires much of its transnational depth.

The problem, therefore, is not simply who controls Central Asia. Such a formulation belongs to a geopolitical framework that is increasingly outdated. The more interesting question is: who controls the networks through which Central Asia communicates with the rest of Eurasia? If China dominates the connectivity linking Xinjiang to Central Asia and onward to eastern China, if Pakistan facilitates access toward the Indian Ocean, if Turkey occupies an increasingly important position in the connections linking Central Asia to the Caucasus and Europe, and if Saudi Arabia controls a significant portion of the Gulf’s energy and financial networks, then the competition is no longer over a single road or corridor. It is over the architecture as a whole.

And this is where the Syrian case returns once again. Syria may appear geographically distant from Xinjiang. Yet the presence of Uyghur fighters in Syria demonstrates that identity networks can cross thousands of miles. An identity does not need geographical contiguity in order to become politically or strategically relevant. It can travel through religion, language, diaspora communities, the Internet, and militant organizations. Physical distance therefore loses part of its traditional strategic significance. Cognitive warfare is, by definition, a form of conflict in which informational and social connectivity compresses geographical distance.

This helps explain why the Syrian question may be viewed from Beijing with concerns different from those of Washington. The United States may ask how to prevent foreign fighters from once again becoming an autonomous and uncontrolled military force. China may ask how to prevent an ethnic and religious component originating from its own territory from acquiring new legitimacy, military experience, and organizational capacity abroad. The individuals may be the same, but the strategic problem is not.

And this is precisely why a renewed dialogue between the United States and China would be necessary, but on profoundly different foundations from those of the past. The emerging Eurasian environment increasingly produces situations in which the strategic interests of Washington and Beijing may overlap even when their political objectives do not.

An actor regarded today as a potential adversary may, under different circumstances, become tomorrow's indispensable partner against a threat that neither power can effectively manage alone.

And this is where one of the most sensitive aspects of our argument lies: Western and Chinese interests may diverge even when dealing with the same phenomenon. Washington may view the integration of former jihadist fighters into a state army as a containment strategy. Beijing may view it as a form of institutionalizing a transnational threat. Ankara may view those fighters through the lens of its own Syrian and regional policy. Damascus may view them as a tool for consolidating power. Each actor views the same subject through a different lens. Geopolitics arises precisely from this divergence of perceptions.

The same applies to the Mecca Agreement. For Riyadh, it is deterrence. For Ankara, it is also strategic autonomy. For Islamabad, it is a way to increase its influence. For Washington, it may represent burden-sharing. For Beijing, it may be both a stabilizing factor and a potential reduction in its freedom of maneuver. For Tehran, it may appear as a new encirclement strategy. Finally, for New Delhi, it strengthens Pakistan. A single agreement thus yields at least six different strategic implications. This is why contemporary geopolitics cannot be interpreted through the lens of a single intention.

Trump's reaction is significant, however, precisely because it points to a possible shift in U.S. policy. While Washington does not necessarily have to directly provide all of the Middle East's security, it can encourage regional states to build their own capabilities. America can then transform itself from an exclusive provider of security into an architect of security ecosystems. It's a huge difference. In such a system, the United States can reduce some of the costs of a direct presence while maintaining influence through technology, intelligence, training, armaments, interoperability, and diplomacy. Trump's statement that countries must be able to "defend themselves more significantly" fits perfectly into this logic.

Of course, there is a paradox. If regional states truly become autonomous, they might also become less controllable by Washington. A more autonomous Saudi Arabia is not necessarily a more pro-American Saudi Arabia. A more powerful Turkey is not necessarily more obedient to the United States. A stronger Pakistan is not necessarily more distant from China. The American network can therefore foster regional autonomy and, with it, a reduction in American control. But this does not necessarily mean a loss of power. It means a shift from a logic of control to a logic of distributed influence.

This is precisely where China might have a conceptual advantage. Beijing has long accepted the idea that power need not necessarily be exercised through formal alliances. The Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the China-Arab States

Forum, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and bilateral partnerships constitute a network of relationships in which China does not need to turn every partner into a military ally. Its strength derives from the density of these connections. In this sense, the competition between China and the United States is not a competition between a Chinese network and an American network. It is a competition between two network models.

The difference is that the Chinese network has been built primarily around infrastructure, trade, finance, and development, while the American one remains more strongly anchored in security, technology, finance, and military alliances. But the two are gradually converging. China is expanding the military dimension of its relations. The United States is seeking greater economic and industrial participation from its partners. And Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia are specifically trying to position themselves at the center of these networks, maximizing the benefits of both.

Pakistan represents the most emblematic case. On the one hand, Islamabad reaffirms that its partnership with China is the cornerstone of its foreign policy. On the other hand, it has entered into a military pact with two regional powers that are deeply integrated into Western security systems. A few days after the signing of the Mecca pact, however, Pakistan and China strengthened CPEC 2.0 and discussed an even deeper political and institutional dimension to their relationship. This is not a systemic error. It is the system itself. Islamabad is building a foreign policy of variable geometry in which each relationship enhances the value of the others.

And that is precisely why describing the Mecca Agreement as a “Western countermove” would likely be too simplistic. The term “countermeasure” can be useful if we understand it as a systemic outcome, not as a documented intention. We have no evidence that Washington ordered, planned, or imposed the agreement. On the contrary, analyses following the signing have emphasized that the pact was conceived independently and that its origins stemmed primarily from the perception that the U.S. security umbrella was insufficient during the regional crisis. But this is precisely where its potential utility for Washington lies: a non-American agreement can still produce an outcome favorable to American interests.

This is the most sophisticated form of multipolar competition. It is no longer a matter of commanding allies, but of creating conditions in which other actors, by pursuing their own interests, produce an order in which U.S. power remains indispensable. It is the principle of leadership through structure.

If this interpretation is correct, then the future of Central Asia will not depend solely on Beijing and Washington. It will increasingly depend on Ankara, Islamabad, Riyadh, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Tehran, Delhi, and the Central Asian capitals. Middle powers are gaining a degree of maneuverability that makes the formation of rigid blocs increasingly difficult. It is precisely in this space that cognitive warfare can become decisive: whoever succeeds in constructing a narrative in which a certain order appears legitimate can secure cooperation without occupation.

China has long operated on this assumption. The National Unity Law is, at its core, a law on internal legitimacy. Beijing wants the population to perceive their belonging to the People's Republic as natural, inevitable, and advantageous. It seeks to reduce the possibility that an external narrative might supplant the national narrative. The construction of the "sense of community of the Chinese nation" –中华民族共同体意识– is therefore a project of narrative sovereignty.

But this very strategy also reveals its own limitation: it can greatly strengthen internal cohesion without being able to prevent neighboring states from pursuing their own interests and building their own networks.

Turkey can, in fact, deepen its presence in Central Asia; Pakistan can continue to diversify its relations while maintaining China as a strategic partner; Saudi Arabia can build its own security architecture without having to make a definitive choice between Washington and Beijing. And precisely because these states are not mere satellites of a great power, their autonomy can produce configurations that none of the external actors fully controls.

This is what makes the Mecca Agreement so interesting. Its importance does not necessarily lie in the immediate military capabilities of the three signatories, but in the fact that it represents a possible institutionalization of regional autonomy. The Saudi statement refers to common security and deterrence; Ankara has announced permanent structures, exercises, and technological cooperation; on August 31, the political and military leaders of the three countries met in Istanbul. If this trajectory continues, the agreement could become something far more significant than the photo op on August 7.

And this is precisely where Trump comes back into the picture. The fact that the U.S. president welcomed the agreement with enthusiasm does not prove that Washington created it. It does, however, show that, at least politically, the U.S. administration does not necessarily view the emergence of greater regional military autonomy as a negative development. This is consistent with a view that allies and partners must contribute more to their own security. The point, therefore, is not to determine whether the U.S. is withdrawing from the Middle East, but to understand whether it is seeking to reshape the nature of its presence. A system in which regional states bear a greater share of security costs may allow the United States to maintain influence while simultaneously reducing its own exposure.

If this were the model, then the true Western countermeasure would not be the Mecca Agreement itself, but the transformation of the entire strategic environment into a network of actors that are autonomous yet interoperable with the West. Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia must not be subordinate to the United States. They must be strong enough to prevent another power from becoming dominant and connected enough to keep Western channels open. This is a far more sophisticated strategy than simple containment.

But this is also where the paradox emerges. A network built around relatively strong states that are not easily penetrated by external forces may be more resilient than a network whose nodes are highly exposed to outside influences. Vulnerability, in this case, does not disappear: it shifts to the interfaces. An external actor may not need to penetrate individual societies directly; it may be enough to exploit rivalries, strategic divergences, and narratives capable of altering the network members' mutual perceptions. The decisive question, therefore, is whether these states will be able to transform their autonomy into lasting coordination without allowing their differences to become tools of disintegration.

In this sense, however, if the architecture were to function—and especially if it were to expand to incorporate other Muslim countries—both China and the United States could find themselves facing a regional structure whose strategic weight would far exceed that of the three original signatories. This would be a paradoxical outcome, because such a development might have been facilitated—at least indirectly—by the very strategies of the great powers: by the United States' diminishing willingness to bear the cost of regional security alone, on the one hand, and by China's promotion of the autonomy of the Global South, on the other. Once set in motion, however, the process could produce a structure with its own logic, one that is not necessarily aligned with either Washington or Beijing.

This possibility therefore warrants close monitoring and, above all, a new forum for strategic dialogue between the United States and China. Not because the Mecca Agreement currently poses an immediate threat to either power, but because its evolution could contribute to the formation of an increasingly autonomous regional architecture—one that is potentially dangerous not so much because of its autonomy, but rather because of its close ties to the world of Islamic terrorism and jihad in the broadest sense.

And this is precisely why the historical memory of the aforementioned, decidedly unscrupulous, "artichoke" policy becomes relevant once again: a structure need not declare from the outset its ambition to become a major geopolitical hub. It can expand gradually, incorporating one node after another and increasing the number of possible connections with each new addition, until it produces an effect that is qualitatively different from the original one.

And here China faces a problem that its new National Unity Law cannot solve on its own. It can make Xinjiang more resilient, strengthen national identity, control information networks, reduce the political autonomy of ethnic identities, and extend its legislation even beyond its borders, but it cannot prevent its neighbors from having their own interests. It cannot prevent Turkey from building relationships in Central Asia, Pakistan from diversifying its alliances, Saudi Arabia from seeking its own security architecture, or Syria from pursuing its own strategic path. It can only try to ensure that these transformations do not translate into a direct threat to China's internal stability.

This could ultimately be the true meaning of the law:

- ***not merely a law on minorities,***
- ***not merely a law on assimilation,***
- ***not merely a law on culture,***

but an attempt to build a cognitive sovereignty strong enough to prevent internal differences from being transformed into hostile external connections.

And it is precisely this interpretation that allows us to piece together the original mosaic.

The Uyghur issue is not merely an ethnic issue because it has a transnational dimension. Syria is not merely a Middle Eastern issue because it has demonstrated how fighters from Central Asia can be incorporated into new state structures. Pakistan is not merely a Chinese partner because it is also a regional power seeking to maximize its autonomy. Turkey is not merely a NATO member because it is simultaneously a Eurasian power building its own network. Saudi Arabia is not merely an American partner because it is pursuing a policy of strategic diversification. And Trump is not necessarily the architect of the Mecca Agreement because it may be enough for him to recognize in its outcome something that aligns with his own vision of the distribution of strategic costs.

The real game, therefore, is bigger than any single actor. It is not just about who holds the most power, but who succeeds in determining the conditions under which other actors exercise their autonomy.

And this is where cognitive warfare takes on its broadest meaning. It is not merely a war consisting of fake news, bots, and propaganda. Those are the most visible tools. The competition also concerns the ability to define the meaning of belonging, to establish which identities are legitimate, which narratives are credible, and which connections are perceived as natural or as infiltrations. Identities thus become geopolitical infrastructures.

Throughout the 20th century, we were accustomed to thinking of infrastructure as physical elements: roads, ports, oil pipelines, railroads, and military bases. In the 21st century, the most important infrastructures will also be cognitive: identity, language, memory, trust, social networks, and the perception of legitimacy. Whoever controls the former controls the movement of goods; whoever influences the latter can shape the movement of ideas, loyalties, and affiliations.

And this is why the Uyghur issue, Syria, Central Asia, and the Mecca Agreement are, in reality, part of the same strategic problem.

In all these cases, what matters is not just territory, but the relationship between identity and connections. An internal difference can become an external connection. An external connection can become a political relationship. A political relationship can become a strategic capability. And a strategic capability can ultimately give rise to a new regional architecture.

The most important characteristic of the current historical phase is therefore that no one fully controls the system.

States try to steer it, but the system produces consequences that often elude the intentions of individual actors. ***The Mecca Agreement may have arisen primarily from the perception that the U.S. security umbrella is insufficient and from a desire for regional***

autonomy, but it may nonetheless produce an outcome beneficial to Washington. The partnership between Pakistan and China may remain the cornerstone of Islamabad's foreign policy, but that very partnership may prompt the United States to view Pakistan as too important to be left exclusively to Beijing. Turkey may pursue its own strategic autonomy and, precisely for this reason, become a bridge between the West, Central Asia, and the Muslim world.

This is the world we have entered: not a system in which countries must necessarily choose a side, but one in which they can purchase weapons from Turkey, energy from Russia, infrastructure from China, technology from the United States, and financial cooperation from the Gulf. They can be politically close to Washington while simultaneously participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. They can be formal allies of the United States and build their own regional security system.

It is a geopolitical landscape in which the concept of "ally" is becoming less useful than the concept of "node". And the most important node is not necessarily the most powerful one, but the one capable of connecting the most diverse systems.

Pakistan is a node. Turkey is a node. Saudi Arabia is a node. Xinjiang is an interface, Syria could become a node. The Gulf is a hub. Central Asia is the vast interface through which these nodes can be connected.

Whoever manages to influence the connections without necessarily controlling the nodes will likely wield a huge share of 21st-century Eurasian power.

And this is where the title of the essay takes on its definitive meaning. The Fortress and the Network are not simply two opposing strategies. They are two different ways of conceiving security. The fortress seeks to prevent the outside world from turning internal differences into vulnerabilities. The network seeks to ensure that no single node becomes indispensable and that no disruption can compromise the entire system.

But the distinction is not absolute.

China is building an external network while fortifying its internal space. The West is building global networks but must contend with the permeability of its own nodes. And the Mecca Agreement introduces a third possibility: a network composed of states that, precisely because they are relatively fortified internally, can become more resistant to external penetration and, at the same time, more autonomous vis-à-vis the great powers.

The real competition, therefore, does not simply consist of deciding which fortress is more solid or which network is more extensive. It consists of determining who will be able to transform their architecture into resilience without simultaneously turning it into a new source of vulnerability. The decisive competition is therefore taking place at the interfaces between identities and networks.

Because 21st-century cognitive warfare does not necessarily begin when someone crosses a border. It can begin much earlier.

It can begin when a community changes the way it defines itself.

When a language is abandoned or imposed.

When a diaspora builds a new network.

When an armed group is transformed into a state institution.

When a country decides that its security can no longer depend on a single power.

When three states decide to regard an attack against one of them as an attack against all of them.

And it can even begin when a foreign president, observing all of this from thousands of kilometers away, decides to enthusiastically embrace a process that he did not necessarily create.

Because in geopolitics, it's not just what an actor does that matters. What matters is what other actors understand that gesture makes possible.

The map of the 21st century, therefore, does not merely show borders. It shows corridors, identities, networks, infrastructure, information flows, diaspora communities, ports, and highways, but also digital platforms and educational systems. It shows where goods flow, but also where ideas flow. And above all, it shows where an internal divide can intersect with an external network.

Xinjiang is one such interface..

Pakistan is one such node.

Turkey is another.

Syria could become one.

On August 7, 2026, Mecca brought yet another such intersection into view.

The future of Eurasia will therefore depend less and less on a single actor's ability to control territory and increasingly on the ability to influence the connections through which other actors will be forced to move.

This could ultimately be the real geopolitical game of the 21st century.

Not the war to conquer Eurasia. The struggle to decide how Eurasia will be connected

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