



**GLOBAL CONFERENCE
on NEW SINOLOGY**
INTERCONNECTED EQUILIBRIUM

ORCA SPECIAL REPORT 6

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 New Delhi

GCNS 2025 CONFERENCE REPORT

CHINA'S 'DREAM' FOR A NEW MANDATE OF POWER

ORCA'S THIRD GCNS REPORT SYNTHESISES THE INSIGHTS, DEBATES AND FORWARD-LOOKING ASSESSMENTS OF MORE THAN THIRTY LEADING SINOLOGISTS FROM INDIA AND ACROSS THE WORLD, DISTILLED FROM TWO DAYS OF HIGH-LEVEL DELIBERATIONS HELD IN NEW DELHI ON 23-24 SEPTEMBER 2025. IT CAPTURES THE CUTTING-EDGE THINKING THAT IS SHAPING CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHINA'S DOMESTIC EVOLUTION, REGIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND GLOBAL STRATEGIC POSTURE.



Transcribed, Edited & Compiled by:

Rahul Karan Reddy, Ratish Mehta, Omkar Bhole, Ophelia Yumlembam



Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA) is a Delhi NCR-based non-partisan research institute producing policy-oriented analysis on contemporary Chinese domestic politics, foreign policy, economy, defense strategy and socio-cultural behavior. We are one of the few think-tanks in India that focus on domestic Chinese policy-making and how it shapes external actions by Beijing. We urge you to peruse our website to acquaint yourselves with our research outputs and ventures which range across [special issues](#), [dashboards](#), [podcasts](#), [infographics](#), [articles](#), a [daily newsletter](#) and more.

The Global Conference on New Sinology (GCNS), ORCA's annual conference, assembles the finest global minds in Sinology from diverse academic backgrounds to analyze and understand Chinese dreams and actions. It is India's leading dialogue-driven China conference taking place every September in New Delhi.

The inaugural edition of the GCNS in 2023 was themed "Beijing's Superpower Ambitions in the 'New Era'". ORCA hosted 55+ national/international experts and 400+ delegates in attendance across 5 sessions spanning two days with over 22 panels. It was India's first Chinese domestic politics-focused conference integrating contemporary facets of New Sinology. It convened leading Sinologists and experts to critically explore China's rising ambitions and internal dynamics. The event deliberations were well received by both policymakers and government representatives, with the conference report having received over 7000+ views.

Building on that momentum, GCNS 2024 centered on "The Art of Power in Zhongnanhai". The conference deliberations focused on how the headquarters of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at Zhongnanhai cultivate, consolidate, retain and project power—domestically and internationally—via economic, diplomatic, political and military engagements to further China's ambitions in the 'new era'.

The event hosted over 1,200 registrants and featured more than 55 distinguished speakers delivering 66 talks across five carefully curated sessions. With 400+ delegates from academia, policy circles, government and media, GCNS 2024 served as a key platform for understanding China's evolving power dynamics.

The unique topics ideated by ORCA at previous editions of GCNS have gone on to become grander avenues of discussion and scholarship. GCNS embodies ORCA's intellectual mission: to craft a new vocabulary of China analysis that is theoretically rigorous, policy-relevant and globally engaged. This third edition builds on this goal with Day 1 featuring thematic panels, keynotes and experts' dialogues and Day 2 hosted closed-door roundtables.

REMARKS FROM DIRECTOR

The idea of GCNS came to us in October 2022, when we were discussing the need for a conference focusing on ‘new’ sinology in India after we realized that ORCA was one of the few - if not only - think tanks in India that conducted a deep-dive research of the 20th National Party Congress of the CPC. To us, such a gathering would assess the contemporary application of sinology that links together traditional focuses on culture, history and language to present-day understanding of defence, politics and security, all with China at its core. That was the basis of ideating the conference’s unique ‘new sinology’ focus. I am proud to say that ORCA has managed to organise such an esteemed gathering in Delhi via the inaugural GCNS in 2023, the second edition in 2024 and now the third edition in 2025.

This year’s theme, “China’s ‘Dream’ for a New Mandate of Power”, could not be more timely. Under Xi Jinping, China is seeking to redefine not only its domestic political legitimacy but also the terms of global engagement. By echoing the Confucian ‘Mandate of Heaven’, this conference seeks to draw connections between China’s contemporary great power ambitions and their deeper ideological foundations, in order to better understand the logic underpinning its twenty-first century statecraft. For India and the wider world, unpacking this transformation is essential to understanding the shifting architecture of global order.

All dialogue formats within these sessions were carefully ideated to be unique and multidisciplinary with most topics being discussed in India for the very first time. All of the topics were ideated meticulously by Team ORCA and shared with our speakers for final approvals and edits. GCNS has from the outset been designed to go beyond simple binaries of cooperation versus competition. It is rooted in the conviction that the study of China must bring together politics, history, security and society. This year’s discussions reflect that philosophy—probing how China uses time, power and narrative to shape its role in the world, and asking how others, from the Indo-Pacific to the Global South, are responding.

ORCA is proud to be the only India-based private think tank devoted exclusively to Chinese politics. Built by a young team of scholars under the age of 30, ORCA’s work spans strategic research, policy engagement and global dialogue. Through initiatives like GCNS, we aim to equip Indian and Asian debates with sharper analytical tools and to place Delhi firmly on the global map of China studies. Every detail of GCNS was passionately and ambitiously crafted by ORCA. The format of the talks were ideated to ensure maximum audience and speaker engagement; from including our unique Experts’ Dialogue format to ensuring our closed-door roundtables on Day 2 happened in the middle of the audience seating area, the planning ensured that the atmosphere in the hall for two days was charged with intellectual dialogue and debate on all things China. ORCA aims to make Delhi (and India) a hub of Chinese domestic political studies to enhance research on how the same shapes Beijing’s international actions.

The conference was extremely well received by the scholarship community, reinforcing our belief that GCNS is not only a conference but also a commitment—to rigorous scholarship, to open dialogue and to building an Indian perspective on China that is both globally engaged and intellectually confident. This report covers extended summaries of the excellent presentations by the speakers on Day 1 at the GCNS 2025, and emerges as a vital resource to shape policy, research and public perceptions when it comes to China.

Eerishika Pankaj

Director, ORCA & Convenor, GCNS

DIVE INTO ORCA'S GCNS

40+ SPEAKERS

250+ IN PERSON ATTENDEES

600+ ONLINE VIEWERS

60 TALKS

5 CLOSED DOOR ROUNDTABLES

4 PANELS

2 KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

2 EXPERTS' DIALOGUES

1200+ REGISTRANTS

160 SPEAKERS OVER 3 EDITIONS

190+ TALKS OVER 3 EDITIONS

1000+ ATTENDEES OVER 3 EDITIONS

The GCNS logo represents the core value behind the tagline that accompanies it: Interconnected Equilibrium. It builds into the theme of a multipolar, interconnected world order symbolized by the globe in the logo, focusing most specifically on the dance between India and China. The emblems of Chinese and Indian flags are positioned within the Yin and Yang symbol, which as a Chinese philosophical concept describes opposite but interconnected forces, serving as a prudent phrase that describes China's relationship with India and many other countries.



The ORCA logo builds on its namesake, orca, which is considered one of the deadliest mammals, while concurrently ranking as amongst one of the most intelligent species on the planet. Orcas are also called 'Pandas of the Sea' –allowing a parallel to China's unofficial diplomats, the giant pandas. Furthermore, as orcas — despite being ferocious — only defend rather than attack and are known to be great at conflict resolution, our logo's mascot draws parallels to India's own strategic autonomy, no-attack policy and role as a promoter of peace and the rules-based order. The map of Asia with no country boundaries showcases the nuances of the region.



Scan for longer bios of the speakers



Scan to read the theme behind each dialogue



Scan to access our website and research outputs



TEAM ORCA AT GCNS 2025 (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT): RAHUL REDDY, RATISH MEHTA, EERISHIKA PANKAJ, TRISHALA S, OPHELIA YUMLEMBAM & OMKAR BHOLE

EERISHIKA PANKAJ (DIRECTOR AND CONVENOR)

One of the youngest think tank heads in the country, her research focuses on Chinese party politics, the India-China border, water politics in the Himalayas, Tibet, the Indo-Pacific and India's bilateral ties with Europe and Asia. She is also an Editorial and Research Assistant to the Series Editor for Routledge Series on Think Asia; a 2020 Young Leader of Pacific Forum's Young Leaders Program; a Quad Think Tank Leader of the U.S. State Department's Leaders Lead on Demand program; a Member of the Indo-Pacific Circle and a Council Member of the WICCI's India-EU Business Council. She is the co-editor of the book 'The Future of Indian Diplomacy: Exploring Multidisciplinary Lenses' and of the Special Issues on 'The Dalai Lama's Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question' as well as 'Building the Future of EU-India Strategic Partnership'.

RAHUL KARAN REDDY (SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AND CO-CONVENOR)

Covering Party politics, external trade and foreign policy in Asia, Rahul produces data-driven research in the form of dashboards, infographics and reports. He is the author of the India-China Trade dashboard, China's Provincial Development Indicators dashboard, China's Public Diplomacy dashboard and others on the Party's Central Committee. He has produced reports on personnel appointments at the 20th Party Congress and conducted public opinion surveys on India & China in Nepal. He is editor of a Special Issue publication on hydro-politics in South Asia, and is developing a multimedia project on the cultural connections between India & China. He is also Director of ORCA Consultancy. His work has been published in 9DashLine, The Diplomat, East Asia Forum, ISDP and Tokyo Review.

OMKAR BHOLE (SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AND CO-CONVENOR)

A Chinese language student with Masters in China Studies from Somaiya University, Mumbai, Omkar has completed the HSK 4 level of Chinese language proficiency and previously worked as a language instructor. His research interests include China's domestic politics, China's foreign policy and economic statecraft in South Asia, China's economic transformation, Digital Yuan and India-China economic relations. He was previously associated with Institute of Chinese Studies and What China Reads. He has presented papers at the 1st All India Conference of East Asian Studies and 16th All India Conference on China Studies. He recently co-edited a special issue on 'India's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia', and has conducted public opinion survey in Nepal. He has authored pieces at Asia Times, ISDP, The Diplomat and South Asia Monitor. He is also the co-convenor of ORCA's Global Conference on New Sinology (GCNS).

RATISH MEHTA (SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AND CO-CONVENOR)

Ratish Mehta is a Senior Research Associate at ORCA. He is the co-editor of the Special Issue on India's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia and serves as the co-lead for the project 'The Episodes of India-China Exchanges: Modern Bridges and Resonant Connections'. He is also the author of ORCA's Special Report on 'Chinese Democracy in Theory and Practice'. Ratish's area of interest includes understanding the value of Narratives, Rhetoric and Ideology in State and Non-State interactions, deconstructing political narratives in Global Affairs as well as focusing on India's Foreign Policy interests in the Global South and South Asia. His work has been published at East Asia Forum, ISDP, The Statesman, South Asia Monitor among others. He is an alumnus of Ambedkar University, Delhi.

TRISHALA S (RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, ORCA & CO-CONVENOR, GCNS)

With a background in Sociology and a minor in Public Policy from Flame University, Pune, Trishala focuses on family and gender studies, demography, and legal systems in China, examining how the aging population, gender disparities, and rural-urban migration influence social welfare, labor policies, and the integration of migrants into urban centers. She is currently working on the Urban Integration series—an analysis exploring how cities like Shanghai and Beijing address challenges in housing, education, and social services amid massive internal migration.

OPHELIA YUMLEMBAM (RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, ORCA & CO-CONVENOR, GCNS)

Ophelia's research focuses on India's Act East Policy, China-Myanmar relations and China's influence in and around India's Northeast region. Before joining ORCA, she worked at the Dept. Of Political Science, University of Delhi, and interned at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research in New Delhi. She graduated with an M.A. in Political Science from the DU in 2023. Ophelia focuses on India's Act East Policy, China-Myanmar relations and China's influence in and around India's Northeast region. Her writings have been featured in the Diplomat, South Asian Voices (Stimson Centre), 9dashline, Observer Research Foundation, among other platforms.

THEME OF GCNS'25

CHINA'S 'DREAM' FOR A NEW MANDATE OF POWER

The 21st century is witnessing a historic reconfiguration of global power, marked by the rise of China and challenges to the post-Cold War liberal order. China's strategic trajectory and global posture today reflect more than material advancement—it embodies a strategic ambition to project an alternative vision of order, governance and global engagement. The theme of this year's conference, "China's 'Dream' for a New Mandate of Power", invited critical scrutiny of the evolving ideological, institutional and geopolitical foundations of China's contemporary statecraft under President Xi Jinping. The phrase "Mandate of Power" intentionally echoed the ancient Confucian principle of the Mandate of Heaven or *tiānmìng* (天命), which conferred legitimacy upon rulers contingent on their ability to sustain order and deliver prosperity. In the modern context, this moral-political logic is being reimagined as a legitimating framework through which the Communist Party of China (CPC) seeks both domestic authority and international influence.

This year's conference interrogated how China is exporting a new model of global order—through state-led capitalism, infrastructure diplomacy, digital authority and controlled multilateralism—all framed under the ideological narrative of the "China Dream" (中国梦). The deliberations sought to show how this dream is not merely a nationalist project or a narrative of 'rejuvenation', but also a conceptual umbrella that asserts China's right to reshape the norms, hierarchies and rules of the international system. China's assertive quest for a new mandate of power is reshaping that threshold—from territorial sovereignty conflicts in Asia to embedding its leadership in UN agencies and forging cross-continental influence through infrastructure-led statecraft. The conference also critically examined how China's military modernization—anchored in strategic innovation, civil-military fusion and expanding expeditionary capabilities—constitutes a central pillar of its broader mandate of power.

China's pursuit, however, is neither linear nor unchallenged. Its projection faces growing pushback across multiple frontiers: strategic contestation in the Indo-Pacific, ideological resistance from liberal democracies, structural vulnerabilities within its own economy and increasing scrutiny from Global South actors wary of dependency and political leverage. These frictions invited a fundamental question: Is China's search for a "new mandate of power" sustainable—and if so, at what cost to the existing world order?

In 2025, GCNS aimed to move beyond the binaries of cooperation versus containment and instead frame China as a complex, evolving node in a system of competing mandates. It is not merely about what China is, but what China wants to become—and what that ambition demands of the rest of the world.



OPENING REMARKS ON THE THEME OF

CHINA'S 'DREAM' FOR A NEW MANDATE OF POWER

BY EERISHIKA PANKAJ (DIRECTOR, ORCA AND CONVENOR, GCNS)

When we launched GCNS in 2022, our aspiration was modest: to test whether there existed space in India for a platform devoted exclusively to “new sinology.” We wanted to see if such a forum could link China’s history, culture, and language to the strategic, political, and security challenges of our present. What began as an ambitious outlook has since grown into a gathering that convenes some of the most distinguished thinkers, policymakers, and practitioners from across the globe linked together by their common passion for understanding China.

Today, as we open the third edition of GCNS, I feel a deep sense of pride in what this community has built together, and a renewed sense of urgency in the questions we must address. For me, this gathering is not merely another academic convening. It represents an intellectual commitment we made three years ago—to give India its own platform for shaping the study of China, on its own terms, and in conversation with the world.

The theme of this year’s conference, “China’s ‘Dream’ for a New Mandate of Power”, speaks to that urgency. China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is reimagining not only its domestic legitimacy but also the very principles of global order. The deliberate echo of the Confucian “Mandate of Heaven” highlights how the Communist Party of China (CPC) seeks to root its twenty-first century ambitions in a historical and cultural logic that connects ancient traditions of legitimacy to modern forms of global power.

By invoking the “Mandate of Heaven” in this conference’s framing, our goal is to connect China’s present great-power ambitions with its deeper ideological underpinnings. This is not about taking China’s rhetoric at face value or rejecting it, but about interrogating the ideas and narratives that give shape to its strategy. What does it mean when a modern one-party state wraps its power projection in the language of dynastic legitimacy? How does this fusion of past and present alter our understanding of China’s rise, and what it demands of the rest of the world? These are questions that go beyond the news cycle, and they are precisely the kinds of questions a new sinology must engage with.

What, then, is this “new sinology” that GCNS champions? The phrase has been debated and interpreted in multiple ways in recent years, but for us at ORCA it carries three essential commitments.

First, new sinology demands that we see China in both its continuity and change. It asks us to move beyond narrow specialisation and disciplinary silos,

to recognize that China cannot be understood only through economics, or only through security, or only through culture. China’s own strategic imagination is holistic, weaving its history, philosophy, language, and politics into a single narrative of rejuvenation. To understand China, therefore, we must study not only its material power but also the cultural and ideological logics that animate it. It is an approach that resists narrow specialisation, and instead demands synthesis: linking language and literature to politics and security, history to strategy, and culture to power. To borrow the words of former Australian PM Kevin Rudd who championed this approach, New Sinology is not only about describing China, but also about explaining what its concepts mean—to China itself and to the world.

Second, I’d like to reflect on Geremie R. Barmé’s China Heritage idea of new sinology, that insists on the importance of both “Official China” and the many “Other Chinas” that exist in counterpoint to it. Official China is the narrative of the state—the Party, its ideology, its institutions, its propaganda. But alongside this exists a rich and complex field of contestation: of alternative voices, creative expres-





-sion and social undercurrents that often resurface in moments of political change. A new sinology cannot privilege one over the other; it must hold both together in critical tension, for it is in that space of tension that China's evolution is most visible.

Third, new sinology calls for synthesis. Too often, analysis of China remains fragmented—linguists who do not engage with politics, historians who do not connect with strategy, or economists who do not engage with society's culture. But what the world needs is integrated insight: analysis that can link the Party's ideology to its foreign policy, its domestic legitimacy to its military posture, its cultural narratives to its digital strategies. A new sinology, then, is not only an academic pursuit; it is a form of intellectual craftsmanship, drawing threads together to create a fuller picture of China in our time.

It is in this spirit that GCNS has been designed. Across the next two days, we will explore how China governs time itself through its chronopolitics—deploying strategic patience and acceleration as tools of power. We will examine how it projects influence in the Global South, how it embeds itself in multilateral institutions, and how it expands its reach in the digital and maritime commons. We will interrogate the invisible architectures of Party authority, the intertwining of ideology and technology, and the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as both deterrent and enabler of the "China Dream."

But this conference also carries a deeper message for us here in India. For too long, China expertise in our region has been shaped largely by external narratives—often framed in Western capitals, and often filtered through external priorities—without engaging with them in a South Asian context, or in collaboration with South Asian sinologists and policymakers. Yet for India, China is not an abstraction. It is a neighbour with whom we share one of the world's most sensitive borders, a competitor in global governance, at times a partner in climate and trade, and an actor whose decisions will shape the very security of our region. To engage with China only through others' scholarship is to see the world through borrowed lenses.

India must, therefore, push its own expertise—rigorous, confident, and globally engaged—while

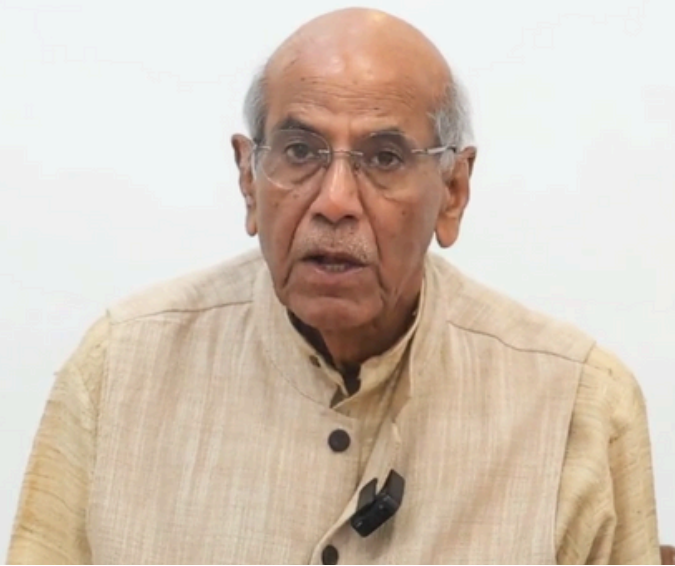
learning from global colleagues and scholars. Delhi, as the country's political and intellectual centre, must become the home for such conversations. This is not only about strengthening academic inquiry. It is about equipping our policymakers, our strategic community, and indeed our public with the tools to understand, anticipate, and respond to China's evolving role in the world.

This is the mission that ORCA has embraced. We are one of India's only private think tanks devoted exclusively to Chinese politics, built by a team under thirty who is always eager to invest every bit of energy into mastering our craft, determined to prove that India can lead serious scholarship on China. GCNS is our flagship commitment to that mission.

None of this would be possible without our community of scholars, who we have built engagements with. I am grateful to the new members joining that community today as scholars and practitioners who have travelled to join us, to our partners who support this endeavour, and above all to my team at ORCA, whose energy and creativity have made this conference possible. I would like to thank the Policy Planning and Research Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, India, for their support to this third edition of GCNS, and to IIC for being our venue partners.

GCNS is meant as a space of critical engagement, as expressed via the unique panels and formats at the event. It is an invitation to move beyond binaries, to ask interdisciplinary questions, and to build the intellectual tools that the twenty-first century demands. Over the next two days, let us interrogate the contours of China's evolving mandate of power. Let us ask not only what China is, but what it seeks to become, and what that ambition means for the world we share.

On behalf of ORCA, I thank you all for being part of this journey. I look forward to our conversations, our respectfully communicated disagreements, and our discoveries.



**WELCOME REMARKS by
AMB. SHYAM SARAN**

Former Foreign Secretary of
India; President, India
International Centre (IIC), New
Delhi

I would like to congratulate the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA) for convening the third edition of ORCA's Global Conference on New Sinology (GCNS). The theme for this year's conference is "China's Dream for the New Mandate of Power", which will be held on the 23rd and 24th of September at the India International Centre. As President of the India International Centre (IIC), I am happy to join the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in supporting this very laudable initiative.

This time, the conference will turn the spotlight on the ideological, institutional and geopolitical drivers of China's current domestic and external policies. It is difficult to understand China's worldview without understanding the nature of its political dispensation, particularly the dynamics of the exercise of power by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

I would like to commend Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, Director of ORCA, for the leadership she has provided in both sustaining and expanding the study of China and the larger Asian geopolitical landscape. The conference has assembled the most impressive group of both, Indian and foreign scholars to deliberate in depth on a number of key topics, such as examining how China plans, prepares and implements its vision of a rejuvenated China. It will explore the toolbox China relies on to be tactically bold while exercising strategic prudence, and how it leverages existing multilateral institutions and processes to advance its interests—even while it takes the lead in establishing rival institutions like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS Development Bank.

Against this backdrop, the conference will explore the complexity of India-China relations, which are slowly but cautiously emerging from the deep freeze following the unfortunate military clash in eastern Ladakh in 2020. In a very unpredictable and turbulent geopolitical landscape, India and China are in some sense two zones of stability. The state of their relations can either add to instability or, if they work together, help the world regain a degree of stability.

It is not clear at this point which direction India-China relations will take, or whether, despite their enduring differences, they will be able to work together. Will they compete for the leadership of the Global South, or will they cooperate in championing the interests of the Global South? There are still questions of major significance as India struggles to fashion a strategy that will help it navigate these choppy waters.

I have no doubt that the conference will prove to be a forum for informed debate and deliberation and will produce well-reasoned outcomes that will be helpful to scholars, diplomats and policymakers alike. I offer my very best wishes for the success of the conference.



23RD SEPTEMBER 2025

SESSION 1 & SESSION 2

For those who wish to listen to the full remarks of Day 1, please access our YouTube channel under the heading of *ORCA's Global Conference on New Sinology 2025 | China's 'Dream' for a New Mandate of Power.*

DAY 1

The Mandate Reimagined: China's Strategic Thinking Behind the Architecture of its Rise

OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR. ANDREW SCOBELL

DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE; ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE, USA

US-China relations are in an unsettled state and India-China relations are in flux. In both the cases, there is scope for optimism, but there are still uncertainties and considerable potential volatility, in both the relationships. Grand strategy is useful as a concept, but to a certain point. It is not the realm of government, but it is what scholars write about. There isn't a speech by Xi Jinping, where he talks about the grand strategy of China, or a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official document on the grand strategy of China. Then who writes it? Who thinks about it? Scholars; scholars from the US, scholars from China and scholars around the world.

So, the larger point is that grand strategy is social science interpretation. It's not hard scientific precision. What the scholars try to do is read between the lines, connect the dots between the documents and speeches of senior leaders to put together and describe what they think is China's grand strategy. There are many definitions of grand strategy. One particular definition, by Professor Zhu Feng of Peking University and me, is interesting because it has Chinese characteristics and has an ends, ways and means approach to strategy. In addition, it takes into account the overarching and enduring vision and the national interest, which is something Chinese scholars and officials take very seriously these days. Grand strategy is a relatively new concept, only about 30 years old, where Chinese documents refer explicitly to Chinese interests, whether they are core interests or overseas interests, but the national interest has been seen as the core part of China's policies and strategies.

So, there are a set of questions guiding my assessment. First, what kind of China does the CCP want to build? The second question is what methods and mechanisms is the CCP employing, and the third question is what are the means and assets that the CCP is using? To the first question; the overarching vision, as part of that definition, national rejuvenation or revitalization of China. But what China are we talking about?

Chinese scholars and officials and documents are fond of telling us that China is a 5000-year old civilization with deeply rooted philosophy of Confucianism, ancient writing styles, a political system that has endured thousands of years and a social system. But contemporary China, just like every other 21st century state, has founding myths. One of those founding myths is that emperor Qin Shi Huang was the first emperor who unified northern China in 221 B.C. He is the one who started the great wall of China. Arthur Waldron's writings, books and careful research shows that the great wall of China was built during the Ming dynasty. But that does not mean that other empires did not participate in the wall building. The part of the wall which is closer to Beijing was built during the Ming dynasty. So, it's a myth, but it's a powerful and important one.

Similarly, in Bill Hayden's highly readable volume on the invention of China, he pointed out that the term China is a relatively new development. So, people from China did not call them-

CONCEPT OF ADDRESS BY ORCA

How does the "China Dream" fuse historical grievance, strategic determinism and regime legitimacy into a comprehensive global posture? This keynote will explore how China's quest for a "new mandate of power" is animated by deeply rooted strategic-cultural logics, the political centrality of the PLA, and evolving perceptions of threat and legitimacy. Framed against the backdrop of China's civil-military fusion, assertive diplomacy and shifting threat perceptions, this keynote will assess what is the PLA's evolving role as a barometer of China's global ambitions—and its internal insecurities.



elves Chinese. It was only 130 years ago, when Chinese modernizers like Liang Qichao and Sun-Yat Sen adopted these terms that only Westerners were using to talk about the country as one social and political entity. Eventually, Chinese scholars and leaders also started using it to describe their own country.

What about today's China? China is ruled by a Communist Party, led by Xi Jinping, but calling it a communist country, or even market-Leninist would not be accurate. This term was coined by two New York Times correspondents to describe a country ruled by a communist party that tightly controlled the political realm, but with considerable freedom in the economic realm. But, today, we can see a China which has less scope in the economic realm and less freedom of markets, so the term is not accurate. Moreover, China cannot be simply be described as an authoritarian state, since it's not a garden variety of state. I am raising the possibility of labelling it as a Confucius fascist state. It is a bit challenging to find one word to describe the current China. So, when was China a great nation? It was before the so-called century of humiliation, when China was an empire. If you look at the map of present China and compare it with the Qing dynasty's map, two of them are pretty close with two exceptions; Taiwan was then a part of Qing China, and Mongolia was another.

So, if we ask if China is an empire today, I know most Chinese scholars would say absolutely not. Is it a multi-ethnic state? But if you ask Tibetans and people from minority groups who live in China, they would not agree. Coming to the second question of what are the methods and mechanisms; China is definitely a centralised, top-down system with strong organisational discipline and Xi Jinping as a powerful leader. People sometimes compare him with Mao, but I would suggest he is not Mao, because he has very different mechanisms to rule. I would call it mass Leninism rather than mass mobilization. Under Xi, it is about mobilizing the bureaucracies through political campaigns, whether within the communist party, military or the state. The political campaigns or sometimes what are termed political purges or the anti-corruption drive under Xi, especially if you look at the military, are ongoing.

Grand strategy in the RAND report on China has a strong domestic focus. The external aspects are manifestations of those domestic pushes. So, internationally China is avoiding a full-blown war, but still try to muscularly achieve its goals. We hear a lot of discussions on the so-called grey zone activities, which is the use of force below the threshold of outright war. We've seen that in border disputes with India, South China Sea and East China Sea, and of course around Taiwan. This is domestication of China's grand strategy. When we talk about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it's a way for China to export its domestic overcapacity. China has already built its roadways, rail and connectivity infrastructure, so what can it do with the engineers and other capacities? What's left is to send them outside China's border. Of course, there are other factors driving the BRI, but the domestic impetus is also part of it.

Under Xi Jinping, China started the most far-reaching reorganization of the military. The general departments were abolished, and everything was concentrated into 15 departments and commissions directly answerable to the Central Military Commission (CMC), which was also slimmed down. This allowed Xi Jinping to be in-charge of the military and the same story has unfolded across other departments in the party-state. There are hard and soft dimensions to the military, in terms of economic and technological aspects, and there are debates in all these areas. Some argue that the conventional wisdom is that China is growing stronger in all these areas. Some question whether this is a bit of smoke and mirrors. Is China's military, economy and technological prowess, all it's cracked up to be? There are certainly a lot of questions on how strong, or how influential these assets can be.

On the soft power side of things, China's wolf warrior diplomacy has won few friends if any, and created enemies as well. But there are a slew of initiatives. We all know about the Confucius Institutes because they are across the world, but the other global initiatives are new and we have to wait and see how effective they are. But, do these initiatives provide inspiration or answers to other countries around the world? Do they provide some of the answers to challenges facing global governance? It's too soon to tell.

There have been different grand strategies China has adopted since 1949. Revolution under Mao Zedong, recovery under Deng Xiaoping, the building of comprehensive national power under Jang Zemin and then national rejuvenation and China's Dream since 2004.

Hu Jintao should be given the credit for starting this, but Hu was not very good at self-promotion, but Xi Jinping is very good at that. What is noticeable under Xi Jinping is the importance of high-tech as a critical driver of economic development and military modernisation. Second, the combination of soft power and hard power, which Zhu and I termed 'smart power' is something Chinese leaders and Xi Jinping particularly are trying to figure out in terms of what is the perfect blend of hard power and soft power to advance the grand strategy.

Regarding implications for India, I think it's important to assess China's security environment. What are the major threats for a country or a regime? In this day, even though non-traditional security threats are widely recognized worldwide, as is in China, as a serious challenge to China, the biggest threat for China is still state-centric. So, why does China not identify India as a threat, as a challenge? As pointed out by the US-China scholar, Susan Shirk, who talks about the one-sided rivalry of India, where India sees China as a serious threat, but China does not seem to reciprocate. But, digging deeper, my conclusion is that China sees India as a serious challenge, but does not talk about it publicly for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it does not want to bestow near-peer or peer legitimacy on India and the other reason is more pragmatic, that it still wants to be friends with India. If you openly identify India as a rival, it creates complications. So, China talks a lot about one country in particular, the US, but can't talk about India as publicly.

So as a student of Bob Jervis, I can't think of anything better than to talk about perception and misconception. Qin Yaqing is well-known scholar in the Chinese foreign affairs university, and his quote that the US may not have a global or overall strategy, but in the eyes of China it does. It's not important that the US has a strategy or not, the Chinese people believe that it does, and that's important. So, the same thing applies for India, China believes that India has a China-centric grand strategy. But China is not going to talk about that, for the reasons outlined above. So does China have a grand strategy? I think there is a lot of reading between the lines. What is certain is that China is very well-focused, having short-term and long-term goals for all domains. It is not so much of a stretch to think that it adds up to a grand strategy.



SESSION 1: HOW DOES CHINA PLAN, PREPARE AND IMPLEMENT ITS VISION?



PANEL DISCUSSION 1

CHRONOPOLITICS WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: STRATEGIC PATIENCE, ACCELERATION AND TEMPORAL POWER

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

The panel investigates how the CPC manipulates temporal scales – speed, sequencing, patience and continuity – as instruments of governance and strategy. China's rise is not just spatial/material, but temporalized through visions of historical destiny, long-term planning and strategic delay. Domestically, this is visible via vision-setting campaigns (2 Centennials, 2049 Dream, etc.), cadre promotion cycles, 5-year plans and the staging of national rejuvenation as historical inevitability. A crucial dimension of this chronopolitics is China's approach to energy security which is strengthened through global dominance in rare earth supply chains with implications for its carbon neutrality goals. Externally, infrastructure projects with multi-decade time horizons, norm-building in slow-burning multilateral platforms and patient accumulation of influence in multiregional theaters (such as Pacific Islands and Central Asia) showcase such manifestations. Moreover, the panel explores how China practices strategic patience—delaying disputes like Taiwan and the LAC - while slowly changing ground realities using dual-use infrastructure as quiet power projection, and timing strategies to send signals to challenge its competitors. By unpacking how China governs time, this panel will reveal subtle dimensions of power: the ability to define when change happens, how fast and on whose terms.

PROF. MANORANJAN MOHANTY - MODERATOR
(Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development)

SIGNIFICANCE OF PLANNING IN CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURE: SIGN OF CONFIDENCE OR HEDGING AGAINST UNCERTAINTY

The concept of Sinology is quite intriguing as European universities began to use this terminology to distinguish the study of China from other disciplines such as philosophy, economy and more. The usage started first in Germany, Italy and then became popular in other European countries. In the modern day academic world, Sinology refers to classical China studies as it differs from strategic studies.

Similarly, concepts like Mandate of heaven and mandate of power, which is the theme of the conference, are parts of Chinese discourse and emphasized by Westerners. However, India needs to develop its own construct of China studies which investigates questions pertaining to India's interests. For India, the primary goal in today's world is building a peaceful world based on happiness, democracy and independence (swaraj).

Thus, India needs to build its world view based on its own formulations while also taking into account American, Chinese and European understanding of the world.

In terms of planning, long-term ambitions are built into leadership of all countries, including China. Thus, scholars must address the question of what is power, which is generally defined as the capacity to enforce and seek compliance from other countries. They must also investigate in what context does a country's power acquire new dimensions as all kinds of power – hard power, soft power and smart power are contextual frameworks.

DR. PRACHI AGGARWAL

(Assistant Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi)

POLITICS AND PLANNING OF FUTURE PROOFING ENERGY RESOURCES

When we speak of China's energy resources, it is necessary to begin with its overall energy mix. China remains a coal-dominated economy, though household consumption remains low and the state is investing heavily in renewables. My presentation focuses on three interrelated aspects of China's energy policy: its diplomatic engagement with energy-rich partners such as Russia and Latin American countries; its effort to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 and peak emissions by 2030 while maintaining economic growth; and the geopolitics of rare earth minerals, where China's dominance continues to shape global supply chains.

At a recent international trade and services exhibition in China, a new energy storage technology that converts surplus grid electricity into thermal battery storage at one-fifth the cost of conventional batteries was unveiled. Interestingly, this innovation originated not from a Chinese company but from Paystar, a Czech firm, illustrating China's pragmatic approach to renewable innovation through foreign collaboration. At the same event, several Chinese companies showcased advances in automation and sanitation technologies, offering technical consulting and services to countries such as Pakistan, Laos, and Mongolia. These examples highlight how China is increasingly exporting not just physical goods but also technical expertise to friendly countries.

In the case of rare earth minerals, the "rarity" lies not in scarcity but in the difficulty of extraction. Although India and several African states possess considerable reserves, China began extraction early and today accounts for around 60 percent of global supply and nearly 90 percent of rare-earth magnets. This dominance is a result of early state investment, weak environmental regulation, and the externalization of health and pollution costs during the formative decades of the industry. Rare earths are critical to modern industries ranging from defense and semiconductors to electric vehicles. China invests roughly 14 billion US dollars annually in this sector.

Following the government's crackdown on illegal mining, the industry has consolidated around two major state-owned firms: China Rare Earth Group and China Northern Rare Earth Group High-Tech. Beijing has also imposed new reporting requirements for all foreign-related transactions, tracking buyers, quantities, and end-use purposes, to retain control of the global supply chain. While output increased by 21 percent in 2023, it slowed to six percent in 2024 due to tighter regulations. Most of the extraction occurs in Baotou in Inner Mongolia and Chaya-Pai in South China.

Global reactions to this dominance are visible in Japan's JOGMEC-led collaborations aimed at diversifying supply chains and in Tesla's efforts to develop electric vehicles that do not depend on rare earth magnets. While China's dominance remains formidable, reserves are distributed worldwide. Many African countries export unprocessed ores to China, often as part of infrastructure-for-resources agreements where repayment takes the form of minerals rather than strategic assets, differing from cases such as Sri Lanka's Hambantota port.

China's energy outreach in Latin America began in the early 2000s and expanded rapidly from 2008 to 2016 under South-South cooperation frameworks. Its focus in the region has been on renewables and lithium extraction in countries such as Chile and Argentina. These projects are typically smaller and less politically visible than Belt and Road investments. Increasingly, private Chinese companies rather than state-owned giants like Sinopec or CNPC are leading these ventures.

Meanwhile, China's partnership with Russia may be described as a "romance of two kingdoms" has deepened through projects such as the Power of Siberia I pipeline, a 400-billion-dollar deal signed in 2014, and the forthcoming Power of Siberia II, alongside the expansion of the Yamal LNG project, which together are expected to double bilateral energy volumes by 2030.

An August 2024 white paper on China's energy transition outlined plans to increase renewables to 20 percent of total consumption while reporting a 19 percent reduction in railway energy. The broader stra-

tegy, known as the “*xian li hou po*” (build first, break later) or 1+N framework, emphasizes building a sustainable foundation before dismantling high-emission sectors. China’s diversified approach, combining LNG imports from Qatar, the United States, and Australia with pipeline gas from Russia, mineral partnerships in Africa and Latin America, and major renewable investments, reflects a comprehensive energy-security strategy. In many ways, Xi Jinping’s pursuit of energy self-sufficiency continues Mao Zedong’s long-held vision of national autonomy, adapted to the imperatives of a globalized and technologically advanced economy.

DR. BALI DEEPAK

(Professor, Chinese Studies, Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

BUREAUCRATIC CLOCKWORK: HOW CHINA PLANS, DEFERS AND ACCELERATES GOVERNANCE

China’s governance system is distinguished by its highly-institutionalized planning mechanisms, which function as both technocratic and political instruments. Planning documents such as the Five-Year Plans, special-purpose plans, the Central Document No. 1, and cross-regional frameworks constitute the backbone of what may be called China’s bureaucratic chronopolitics - the governance of time through planning, sequencing, and recalibration. Far from being mere administrative tools, these documents articulate the strategic temporality of the Chinese state, in which long-term vision, staged implementation, and adaptive feedback loops combine to produce a distinctive form of “bureaucratic clockwork.”

At the core of China’s planning system lies an effort to reconcile long-range strategic objectives with the pragmatics of adaptive governance. From Deng Xiaoping’s “Three-Step Strategy” in 1987 to Xi Jinping’s current “two-stage development plan” (2020–2050), planning has operated as a temporal scaffold linking the immediate and the aspirational, the local and the national. For example the three-stage development strategy aimed to first eliminate material shortages by doubling the 1980 GDP, then achieve a “relatively comfortable” standard of living by quadrupling it by 2000, and finally complete modernization by the mid-21st century with living standards comparable to moderately developed nations.

Xi’s strategy aims to realise modernisation by 2035 and enhance China’s stature as a developed country by 2050. Therefore, the planning process clarifies development goals and establishes sequential tasks that translate abstract political visions, such as the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” into operational milestones. Yet, the political rationality of planning extends beyond goal-setting; it is equally about mobilizing administrative energy, fiscal resources, and social participation around the Party’s central vision.

Equally important is the dialectic between central guidance and local experimentation, often summarized in the maxim “crossing the river by feeling the stones” (摸着石头过河). Planning in China is not a rigid blueprint but an evolving architecture of policy feedback. The system relies on pilot programs, experimental zones, and trial reforms to generate empirical learning before scaling policies nationwide. The transformation of the Household Responsibility System from a village-level initiative in Xiaogang (1978) into national rural reform illustrates this dynamic vividly. Likewise, the incremental expansion from the original four Special Economic Zones to over twenty Free Trade Zones, or the evolution from regional carbon trading pilots in 2010 to a national Emissions Trading System in 2021, exemplifies the adaptive learning logic embedded within the state’s temporal machinery.

China’s reputation as a state that can “plan and deliver” on an unparalleled scale derives from this synthesis of long-term vision and adaptive pragmatism. The record of infrastructure development, spanning over 600 million buildings in urban and rural areas; 5 million kilometers of road networks; 900,000 bridges and tunnels, as well as more than 6,000 berths in coastal areas demonstrates the system’s capacity for coordination and execution. Equally, targeted poverty alleviation campaigns that lifted over 800 million people out of poverty show how state planning can achieve social transformation within compressed timeframes.

Yet, these achievements coexist with significant systemic challenges. The target-driven nature of bureaucratic performance can induce distortions such as redundant investment and overcapacity, as seen in segments of the real estate, solar or electric vehicle industries. More fundamentally, despite progress in sectors like 5G and green energy, dependence on imported semiconductors and foundational software reveals the limits of state-led technological upgrading. In short, China’s planning excels in mobilization but struggles in fostering innovation autonomy.

An often-overlooked dimension of China's planning logic is its temporal management of disruption. Delays, deferrals, and accelerations are not merely technical adjustments but are actively politicized instruments of control. Through centralized decision-making, the state can swiftly reprioritize projects or re-sequence timelines in response to changing strategic contexts. Bureaucratic buffer capacity, particularly within state-owned enterprises, cushions the system from shocks. In this sense, China's governance of time is not only about achieving speed but also about mastering rhythm, knowing when to accelerate, when to pause, and when to reframe.

Ultimately, China's bureaucratic clockwork represents a form of chronopolitical governance in which the state organizes development not only through spatial hierarchies but also through temporal orchestration. Its strength lies in the ability to synchronize multiple time horizons such as short-term experimentation, medium-term planning, and long-term rejuvenation within a single political project. Yet, as China enters a new phase defined by high-quality growth, technological self-reliance, and ecological transformation, the system faces a fundamental tension, i.e. how to balance the centralizing power of top-level design with the creative dynamism required for innovation. The success of this balancing act will determine whether China's planning state can evolve from a machine of delivery into an engine of discovery.

DR. SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI

(Professor, Chinese Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

CHRONOSTRATEGY IN MILITARY MODERNIZATION AND THE ART OF STRATEGIC PATIENCE

Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy emphasized keeping a low profile and maintaining strategic patience, a principle that guided China's external engagement for nearly three decades. Under Xi Jinping, this approach has evolved significantly. While Xi continues to invoke long-term strategic goals, his leadership has displayed a greater readiness to act on contingencies, such as potential Taiwan Strait scenarios by 2027. Nevertheless, the underlying principle of strategic patience remains central to advancing China's long-term objectives: ensuring national security, preserving territorial integrity and achieving great-power status.

At the 19th Party Congress, Xi declared China's ambition to "occupy the centre stage of global politics." This pursuit of great-power competition has persisted across successive U.S. administrations from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, and remains a defining feature of Beijing's external behaviour. A core element of Chinese statecraft, however, continues to be the avoidance of impulsive action. Xi reportedly told European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that the United States is attempting to provoke China into military action over Taiwan, emphasizing instead the need for restraint and long-term thinking. The war in Ukraine has further complicated strategic calculations by introducing new uncertainties into potential Taiwan Strait outcomes. Incremental advancement remains the preferred approach.

Recent military parades in Beijing reflect this incrementalism through the gradual transition from Soviet-origin equipment to indigenously developed systems such as the T-98 and T-100 tanks, equipped with modular turrets, satellite communications, and laser-guided munitions. Similar patterns are evident in the J-35 sixth-generation fighter, which integrates both domestic and adapted Western technologies. A third dimension of strategic patience lies in its timelines. The 19th Party Congress reaffirmed two key centennial goals: 2021, marking the centenary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and 2049, celebrating 100 years of the People's Republic of China. Although official statistics claim the eradication of poverty by 2021, socio-economic disparities persist.

Within the same framework, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization plan proceeds in phased stages: joint operations and theatre command reforms by 2020; mechanization and informatization between 2021 and 2035; and intelligentization by 2049 to build a world-class military. The goal is to reach operational proficiency comparable to elite forces such as the U.S. Navy SEALs. Crucially, China's modernization process operates without electoral or budgetary constraints, an institutional advantage in sustaining long-term strategic focus.

This patience is also aimed at avoiding the so-called Thucydides Trap, the danger of direct confrontation with the United States. Despite a slowdown from nearly 10 percent to 7.4 percent, China's defence budget continues to outpace GDP growth, channeling major investments into state conglomerates such as AVIC, Norinco and Poly Technologies.

Emphasis on asymmetric warfare, indigenous innovation, and military-civil fusion underscores the PLA's ongoing transformation. Ten defence white papers published between 1998 and 2019 chronicle this modernization trajectory.

Yet, China's strategic patience has discernible limits. The recent dismissal of senior leaders within the PLA Rocket Force and the Defence Ministry points to internal instability that may affect long-term planning. The PLA also suffers from a lack of combat experience since its 1979 Vietnam War. Domestically, rising nationalism, economic slowdown and sporadic protests challenge political stability. Externally, Beijing's overextension through initiatives such as the Belt and Road, and frameworks like the Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and Global Governance Initiative (GGI), has created new frictions. Persistent tensions with the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines further complicate China's strategic calculus. Ultimately, while strategic patience remains a guiding doctrine, it is under increasing strain from internal and external pressures. Misjudgments in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea, alongside potential "black swan" events such as global conflicts or financial crises, could upend China's carefully calibrated long-term strategy.

DR. YU HONG

(Senior Research Fellow, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore)

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENTS

The infrastructure connectivity-centered Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains a hot topic for both academia and the policy research community with an interest in China, regionwide as well as worldwide. Infrastructure connectivity is becoming an important national strategy for the Chinese authorities in its attempts to boost Chinese exports, to gain control over markets and industrial supply chains. Against the shift of the global geopolitical environment, China also wants to reshape the world rather than being shaped by the changing world, leveraged on the BRI implementation.

Many developing countries involved lack both technological know-how and the capacity to raise significant amounts of capital to fund the infrastructure projects. China offers infrastructure financing by addressing the urgent development needs of the developing countries. It creates a strong appeal for the developing countries' participation. For the participating countries, the BRI offers a relatively instant and tangible reward from obtaining upfront capital for infrastructure improvement without the political and governance reform strings attached by the West-dominated multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund or World Bank.

By financing and building long-term infrastructure projects, the BRI aims to accelerate industrial take-off and economic growth in the participating countries. Nevertheless, the BRI gives Beijing significant long-term influence. It combines financing, construction and manufacturing of exports, locking in supplier status and dependency in the participating countries. China has embarked on very rapid and massive overseas lending since 2013 when it launched the BRI. It has emerged as a major lender and provided hundreds of billions in loans and credit to the developing world. This allows China to exert immense influence over these countries' debt sustainability outlook.

As Chinese authorities push for the internationalization of the RMB and further enhancement of its participation in global financial institutions, this will facilitate funding and building by Chinese banks and companies of infrastructure projects abroad under the BRI cooperation framework. The rising use of RMB loans and settlement, bilateral swap lines from the People's Bank of China, and China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System all help to reduce dollar-dependence for certain BRI deals, although the scale remains partial. The majority of China's overseas lending still relies on the U.S. dollar for financing and payment settlement.

In response to the international criticisms, China has been making readjustments to the BRI and its project implementation since 2019. In contrast to its emphasis on large ticket megaprojects during the first decade of its implementation, China's BRI is slowly shifting to smaller projects with tighter due diligence and risk controls in the coming decade. These smaller in scale and targeted projects are more politically attainable, commercially viable and environmentally sustainable. This shift could have profound long-term implications for the regional countries and beyond.

Chinese firms are now shifting to financing and constructing more projects related to clean tech (solar/wind power, electric vehicles and battery) and the digital economy (5G, cloud data centres and artificial intelligence) abroad. In particular, leveraging its dominant position in the global manufacturing industry of renewables, China has been making more investments in renewable energy projects in the BRI countries since 2019.





EXPERTS' DIALOGUE 1

MAPPING CHINA'S ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY: BETWEEN STRATEGIC ASSERTIVENESS AND TACTICAL ADAPTATION

CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE BY ORCA

This dialogue explores how China modulates its economic diplomacy based on regional power asymmetry, systemic constraints and shifting geopolitical alignments. Moreover, in the face of global economic uncertainty, China's engagements have adapted to relative power shifts and systemic pressures, with an aim to signal China's global economic leadership. Whether it is managing competitive interdependence with stronger actors like the EU and the US, or offering concessional infrastructure and recalibrating debt terms in distressed economies in the Global South, Beijing's diplomatic strategies are calibrated to secure economic interests unique to each region. A major part of China's foreign policy strategy, particularly in emerging markets, is forging economic linkages through regional forums such as CELAC and FOCAC as well as institutions like Boao Forum for Asia and SCO, which help institutionalize its economic diplomacy. This Experts' Dialogue will interrogate the duality of economics and diplomatic practice, assessing the use of incentives, conditionalities and normative messaging across regions, and will draw lessons for other states like India engaging with an increasingly adaptive China.

DR. SHINO WATANABE

(Professor, Faculty of Global Studies, Sophia University, Japan)

Since the inauguration of the second Trump administration in January 2025, U.S.-China economic relations have shifted markedly in China's favor. China appears to perceive the second Trump administration as a relatively manageable negotiating partner, and bilateral relations have, on the whole, remained stable.

First, China is, to date, the only country to have achieved a substantial reduction in reciprocal tariffs with the United States. According to the joint statement of May 12, U.S. additional tariffs on Chinese goods were lowered from 145 percent to 30 percent, while China's additional tariffs on U.S. goods were reduced from 125 percent to 10 percent.

Second, through the negotiation process, China positioned itself explicitly as a G2 power, one of the two principal actors in international politics. In contrast to other countries, which dispatched delegations to Washington, China conducted negotiations exclusively in third countries: in Geneva (May 10-11), London (June 9-10), Stockholm (July 28-29), and Madrid (September 14-15).

Third, and of greater significance, China institutionalized a bilateral consultation mechanism with the Trump administration. These consultations have been led by Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng, who oversees economic policy in China, and by U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent together with U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer. President Trump has further announced that he will meet President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC summit on October 31 and November 1, and is expected to visit China in early 2026 for a summit meeting. Hosting a U.S.-China summit in Beijing would provide Xi with

an important opportunity to project leadership both domestically and across the Global South.

Moreover, President Trump's instrumentalization of tariff policy has created a favorable environment for China to expand its engagement with the Global South, particularly in emerging markets in Africa and Latin America, as well as with its neighbors in Southeast Asia. China has consolidated its influence in these regions by reinvigorating investment and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and by launching the Global Governance Initiative in September 2025. This new Initiative followed three earlier ones: the Global Development Initiative (September 2021), the Global Security Initiative (April 2022), and the Global Civilization Initiative (March 2023). Collectively, these four initiatives illustrate China's ambition to shape international order aligned with its own political and normative preferences, namely with Chinese characteristics, across multiple sectors.

Nevertheless, China's slowing economy constrains its external engagements. Its overseas efforts are therefore likely to remain selective, as seen in its focus on Central Asia and Africa in the first half of 2025, reflecting limited resources for foreign projects. Simultaneously, weak domestic demand and demographic pressure are pushing Chinese companies to invest abroad and to expand exports. As economic growth moderates, reliance on external markets is increasing, ensuring continued emphasis on BRI-centered partnerships as a main driver of China's growth.

At the same time, Chinese development finance is expected to remain constrained. According to the China's Overseas Development Finance Database compiled by the Global Development Policy Center at Boston University, lending by the China Development Bank and the Export Import Bank of China has declined steadily since peaking in 2016. It also indicates that annual financing averaged approximately USD 616 million in 2009, USD 486 million in 2015, and has stabilized at roughly USD 200–300 million per year between 2020 and 2024.

Moreover, Chinese overseas lending is disproportionately concentrated in low-income and least developed countries (LDCs). Such lending is highly exposed to default risk and may generate substantial volumes of non-performing debt. Careful monitoring will be required to assess the sustainability of China's financial support for BRI projects and the state of economy in China as well as in the Global South.

DR. JAGANNATH PANDA

(Head, Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs, Institute for Security & Development Policy, Sweden)

China does not just pursue economic diplomacy. It has a mix of economic and political diplomacy. When we talk about diplomacy or economic diplomacy in the context of China, there are two things to analyze: how the party views it and how China's top leadership view it. They might complement each other, but there is a difference. Every leader brings their own notion of putting China in front. The way Xi Jinping has orchestrated his view of economic diplomacy over the last ten years gives us a lot to analyze. He has put China on the international map, revamping China's domestic and international posture. But it is important to note what he hasn't told us, which has been overlooked by the international media as well. In his New Year's speech delivered on 31st December 2024, President Xi talked about the Chinese economy thriving and said its total GDP is soon expected to surpass 17.7 trillion US dollars. Interestingly, he claimed that the Chinese economy is doing exceptionally well and better than some Western economies. India, as a neighboring country and partner in so many forums like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Russia-China-India (RIC) trilateral forum, was not mentioned, even though India is one of the largest economies.

Second, although he said the Chinese economy is doing well compared to Western economies, he didn't mention the slow growth pattern of Chinese GDP. This is because China's leadership does not present the exact picture, how and where China is struggling and how the world can support China's efforts to manage these difficulties. A highlight of Xi's strategy is the merging of economics with nationalism in China's economic diplomacy. I echo Dr. Andrew Scobell's observation that the Chinese leadership doesn't really talk about India, which is a deliberate attempt. Many in India and around the world see the *yi dai yi lu* (One Belt One Road) program as a challenge. India, in particular, has from the start called it a strategic challenge and boycotted it too, making it clear that it is a unilateral, Party proposition, not a multilateral one.

The Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) has six wings or corridors, which are critical to China's growth. Each corridor has a different pattern: in some, China supports bilateral goods trade to execute multilateral frameworks, and in others China applies the reverse, where multilateral networks enhance bilateral trade deals. For example, in the case of the 16+1 cooperation framework: China worked bilaterally with countries first and then pushed the multilateral proposition. Similarly, in the case of the SCO, China pursued this multilateral forum to cultivate bilateral relationships with Central Asian countries, recently expanding its engagement to Iran and Belarus. While the BRI is mostly about economic diplomacy, it reveals China's approach to economic and political engagement.

Over the last 10 years, China has emerged as a resident power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This hasn't just started in Xi Jinping's time, but in fact began with Hu Jintao. And over the last decade, China's forums like the BRI have continued to execute national planning, foreign policy and its economic diplomacy. Additionally, the AIIB story is interesting, because it is a universal proposition, unlike BRI's unilateral approach. The AIIB has funded a vast number of projects around the world since 2016. Countries like India have missed out on several grand initiatives over the last decade to take advantage of economic opportunities. However, there have been a few propositions that deserve closer attention. The India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced at G20, and should be an area of targeted focus. While practical and geopolitical difficulties exist, it is possible to operationalize the corridor if India can work closely with the EU. If the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can help materialize multimodal connectivity, rather than just the physical infrastructure, it is possible to bring the two continents closer. In this context, countries in the Middle East become natural partners through supply chain networks of the FTA, supporting the IMEC initiative ultimately.

Japan remains a special partner for India, despite Japan's domestic political shifts. The special methodology of India and Japan's Special Global Partnership cannot be understated. Japan is India's biggest investor, especially as it has been allowed to operate in Northeast India. This should extend to the Indian Ocean to check China's advances through its economic diplomacy forums. India must also leverage its chemistry with Japan from the Northeast to Southeast Asia. It could also invite Japan to join the IMEC, leveraging their role as an economic partner to Europe and the Middle East.

China may not have a grand strategy, but they do have grand thinking. Most of China's initiatives are linked to the world order it is envisioning. Two things stand out from China's history. First, China is attempting to bring the word and idea of *tianxia* back into contemporary engagements to justify its approach and actions. Second, China is linking the idea of the Chinese Dream to its international engagements. The story is manufactured in several white papers and in China's communication to the international audience.

The BRI is more about the surplus supply of industrial outputs, but it is also creating divisions. First, it is about bringing a portion of the West to join the BRI, thus dividing them. Second, the middle powers are being engaged via a variety of channels to support the BRI and similar ventures. Third, smaller, underdeveloped economies are being made over reliant on China. So these divisions exist as a function of China's economic diplomacy.





INVISIBLE ARCHITECTURES IN THE CPC PLAYBOOK: SYMBOLS, VALUES AND RHETORIC

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

China's internal architectures of power are critical foundations of its national strength, which fuse symbolic authority, identity construction, and transnational influence. This panel discussion foregrounds how the Communist Party of China (CPC) institutionalizes the ritual aesthetics of Party authority—from congresses and parades to inspection tours and centennial commemorations—as performative tools that produce a domestically resonant narrative of legitimacy. It also unpacks how the Party emphasises identity formation through mechanisms like the Social Credit System and ideological education. It focuses on the construction of an "ideal citizen" calibrated for obedience, morality and cultural conformity. Lastly, the panel explores how Party and state institutions present China's normative and policy offerings on the global stage. Such efforts are reinforced by the Chinese diaspora and state-controlled media platforms, which disseminate carefully curated narratives of China's global role, in line with internal ideological imperatives. This panel will shed light on the operation of China's invisible power architectures and their impact on Chinese society and the world.

DR. RAJIV RANJAN - MODERATOR

(Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi)

EVOLVING INSTRUMENTS OF CHINA'S DOMESTIC LEGITIMACY AMIDST STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

The legitimacy of the Communist Party of China 中国共产党 (CCP) remains the cornerstone of political authority in the People's Republic of China (PRC), evolving from its revolutionary foundations toward a multifaceted framework that blends economic performance, ideological articulation and nationalist sentiments.

Legitimacy (合法性), in China, is not framed through liberal-democratic notions of a social contract but understood as the CCP's rightful leadership derived from historical mandate, effective governance, and continuity with China's civilizational traditions. State media such as the People's Daily (人民日报) frequently describe legitimacy as the Party's ability to "represent the fundamental interests of the masses", a claim justified through material achievements and ideological coherence.

The reform era heralded by Deng Xiaoping marked a decisive transition from revolutionary to performance-based legitimacy. The "reform and opening-up" (改革开放) shifted the locus of the Party's authority to growth and improved living standards. The 2021 White Paper on "Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution" (人类减贫的中国实践) claims the lifting of 98.99 million rural citizens from poverty, as emblematic of this performance-oriented legitimacy.

Yet, as observers within China, such as Yu Keping (俞可平), have argued, improving expectations in an increasingly complex society means that economic performance alone can no longer sustain authority.

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has broadened its legitimacy base through the ideological systematisation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), blending Marxist principles with Confucian ethics to reassert the Party's moral and historical centrality.

Despite official portrayals of stability, significant structural pressures now test the Party's adaptive capacity. Slower growth—recorded at 4.7 per cent in 2024—alongside sustained real-estate weakness following the Evergrande crisis (恒大集团债务危机), rising youth unemployment at 17.1 per cent and increasing public discontent reflect the growing complexity of governance. Demographic contraction, indicated by the 2023 census at 1.409 billion people and a fertility rate of 1.09, adds further strain, producing ageing-related burdens and shrinking the labour base. Environmental and climatic stresses, such as the 2024 floods in Henan, intensifying coastal typhoons and uneven healthcare delivery and pension pressures, complicate perceptions of equity and competence in governance. These realities have deepened pressure on the traditional model of performance legitimacy and prompted renewed experimentation in legitimacy production.

Therefore, the CCP's strategy has become multidimensional, seeking to balance ideological reinforcement, welfare distribution, narrative management, legislative façade and calibrated coercion. "The Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century" (中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议) positions the CCP as historically indispensable, while the constitutional codification of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era enshrines ideological continuity. Appeals to the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦) and "cultural nationalism" (文化民族主义) frame legitimacy in civilizational superiority and nationalism, offsetting uncertainty linked to slower economic expansion. At the same time, the Cyberspace Administration of China (国家互联网信息办公室) regulates the public sphere through "clean cyberspace" initiatives, ensuring that digital communication aligns with Party-defined boundaries of acceptable discourse. Major crises, including the end of the zero-COVID policy (动态清零), have been reframed in state media as deliberate strategic recalibrations toward "high-quality development", demonstrating a sophisticated narrative management apparatus.

Welfare schemes remain central to sustaining legitimacy. The "common prosperity" (共同富裕) campaign emphasises poverty alleviation consolidation, rural revitalisation and more balanced wealth distribution through taxation and corporate reform. Yet these efforts coexist with an expanding apparatus of social control. China describes strengthening digital surveillance as "social governance" mechanisms aimed at pre-empting dissent.

A closely related development is the increasing prominence of legislative legitimacy under Xi Jinping's "comprehensive law-based governance framework". The National People's Congress (NPC) (全国人民代表大会) is the primary institutional channel through which Party leadership is legally formalised and publicly displayed. Legislation and procedural innovations within the NPC Standing Committee have streamlined law-making under unified Party supervision. At the same time, constitutional review mechanisms provide citizens with channels for petitioning grievances. From the Chinese perspective, this model demonstrates governance responsiveness, rationalisation of authority and procedural discipline rather than mere formalism.

In its contemporary form, the CCP's legitimacy is an adaptive synthesis of tradition and modernity, authority and responsiveness, coercion and consent. It draws simultaneously from historical narratives, developmental outcomes, ideological integration and procedural governance. Faced with profound structural and social transformations, the Party continues to expand and redefine the sources of its legitimacy, seeking stability through a carefully balanced integration of performance, ideology, cultural identity and institutional control.

DR. SRIPARNA PATHAK

(Professor and the Director of the Centre for Northeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, Delhi NCR)

RITUALS OF POWER: SYMBOLS, SPEECHES AND THE AESTHETICS OF LEGITIMACY

In the grand theatre of global politics, where leaders rise and fall on the strength of their narratives, China stands as a master performer. Under Xi Jinping's watchful gaze, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) doesn't just govern; it orchestrates.

For the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the CCP ruling it, it is crucial to maintain the Party's rule in an era of economic headwinds and geopolitical tensions. There are adequate recent examples from the PRC to show how ancient traditions meet modern spectacle to forge unbreakable bonds of loyalty.

In political theory, rituals are the ceremonial performances that transform raw authority into something sacred, something unquestionable. They become the choreography of legitimacy. Symbols provide the visual shorthand, such as dragons for imperial might, red for revolutionary fire. Speeches weave the narrative, turning policy into poetry. Aesthetics are found in the artistry- the lighting, the music, the emotional pull; all that makes it feel inevitable, beautiful, even divine. As Crispin Sartwell argues in his work on political aesthetics, these elements make abstract power tangible, commanding respect through sensory immersion. In China, where elections are absent, legitimacy is not voted in; it is staged.

Considering symbols first, those enduring icons that bridge China's imperial past with its socialist present. The dragon robe, a relic from Emperor Qianlong's era, isn't just fabric; it is a puzzle of power. Adorned with twelve ancient emblems – the sun, the moon, mountains, flames - these “twelve patterns” from the Zhou Dynasty symbolize cosmic order and the Mandate of Heaven, the ancient belief is that rulers must align with the universe's harmony or face downfall. In 2025, at the Hong Kong Palace Museum's Spring Festival exhibit, these robes were displayed not as dusty artifacts but as living endorsements of continuity. Peng Liyuan, Xi's wife, echoed this in state visits, donning modern silk designs infused with traditional motifs - silk flags waving like mobile billboards of national pride. Why does this matter? In a year of economic slowdown, these symbols remind the people: The Party is not just new money; it is an eternal legacy. Such visuals assert pride against Western dominance, turning fashion into fortification.

But symbols alone are static; enter speeches, the verbal alchemy that turns ideology into inspiration. Xi's rhetoric, laced with Confucian echoes and Marxist steel, is a prime example. His “China Dream” speeches - rejuvenating the nation, fulfilling historic missions – aren't dry policy documents; they are epic calls to arms, blending ambition with ancestral wisdom. Take the 2023 National People's Congress: Xi's address invoked “excellent traditional culture,” positioning the CCP as moral heirs to ancient sages, not just Bolshevik successors. This isn't accidental; it's ritualized revival. Scholars like Aleksandra Kubat highlight how Xi weaponizes phrases like *youxiu chuantong wenhua* [优秀传统文化] to legitimize rule through ethics, urging cadres to treat propaganda as “art and science,” appealing to hearts as much as minds. In 2024's “Two Sessions”, amid youth unemployment protests, Xi's words shifted to “common prosperity,” a speech so rhythmic it echoed Mao's mass-line pep talks, restoring faith through familiar fervour.

Aesthetics become the secret sauce that makes it all mesmerizing. Televised rituals amplify this, turning politics into prime-time poetry. One example of this is the 2025 CCTV program “Ancient Rhyme and New Voice - Qingming.” This episode, analysed in a *Frontiers in Psychology* study, showcased sacrificial offerings, agricultural rites, and spring outings—not as history lessons, but as emotional symphonies. Visuals of blooming willows and ancestral bows, scored with erhu strings, elicited “resonance” among millions, blending Zhou-era *li* (ritual propriety) with Xi-era nationalism. It's Confucian harmony weaponized for screens: Ritual brings order, but here it's for Party glory. As Christian Sorace observes, without electoral mandates, the CCP must “produce, exalt, and acclaim” its own myths, connecting Xi's gestures to predecessors while elevating him supreme.

Recent events crystallize this fusion. In September 2025, China hosted dual spectacles: the 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin, a soft-power ballet of multilateral handshakes and multipolar toasts, followed days later by Beijing's Victory Day Parade. The SCO was aesthetics of inclusion - leaders in tailored suits against Tiananmen backdrops, speeches on ‘cooperation over coercion.’

Then, the parade: hypersonic missiles thundering past, nuclear triads gleaming under red banners, soldiers in crisp PLA uniforms marching in lockstep precision. Symbols abounded - dragons on epaulets, Mao portraits flanked by Xi banners. Xi's speech was a thunderclap of deterrence: “Peace through strength,” invoking ancient axioms like “those who offend China will be punished, no matter how far.” Together, these events were not random; they were a one-two punch – diplomacy's embrace, military's iron fist - projecting a China that's both benevolent hegemon and unyielding guardian. For partners like Pakistan, reassurance; for rivals like the US, unease.

Even in crisis, aesthetics salvage legitimacy. During the COVID-19 tail-end in 2023, social media narratives on Weibo turned disaster into devotion. State-orchestrated poems from Wuhan nurses – “The slogans are yours, the praises are yours” - framed sacrifice as aesthetic duty, refusing gratitude as an “ethical gesture” against ideology’s grind. Contested? Yes, but the Party’s visuals - heroes in hazmat suits, lanterns lighting empty streets - reknit the social fabric, moulding memories of resilience.

In conclusion, China’s rituals aren’t relics; they’re resilient tools in a volatile world. From dragon robes whispering eternity to parades roaring resolve, they remind us that legitimacy is performed, not presumed. In Xi’s China, power isn’t just held – it is beheld, felt, adored. As we navigate our own political stages, it is pertinent to remember that in the aesthetics of authority, the show must go on.

DR. JACQUELINE ZHENRU LIN

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NATIONALISM, MORALITY AND COMMEMORATION: SHAPING THE IDEAL CITIZEN WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Nationalism has been a pillar-like ideology of moral and cultural propaganda in China, emphasizing the “love” for the Party-state as natural, moral and compulsory. Since the 1990s, when the Tiananmen Square incident marked the collapse of Maoism and revolutionary historicity, the Chinese Communist regime has revived nationalism to unify a society that had been divided by economic and political inequalities.

One key element of nationalism is to essentialize the nation-state as something unchanging. To achieve this, new enemies and heroes have been remade through campaigns, education, and various media channels. Since the 2000s, following decades of marginalization in revolutionary historicity, the commemoration of the Second World War, known in Chinese as *Kang Ri Zhanzheng* (the War of Resistance against Japan), has been instrumentalized to promote a specific version of Chinese nationalism. The narratives and sentiments have shifted from victimhood to great victory in Xi’s China today.

While current scholarship theorizes the new wave of Chinese nationalism stemming from the second World War (WWII) commemoration as a state project to boost legitimacy and educate citizenship, scholarship should focus more on the role of society and non-state actors such as local communities, online activists, NGOs and the Chinese diaspora in reshaping war histories and commemorating national heroes. This process is rife with contestations and competitions due to the fluctuating official narratives.

Unlike other countries in WWII, China, represented by the Nationalist government in 1945, resumed its decade-long civil war with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1949, the Nationalist government was defeated and fled to Taiwan. WWII veterans and fallen soldiers, associated with the Nationalist government and labeled as former rivals of the CCP, were stigmatized as enemies of the people in the newly established communist state from 1949 until the early 1990s. Post-war communities, particularly during the Maoist period, were mobilized to destroy cemeteries of fallen soldiers and participate in political movements attacking veterans. These same communities are now mobilized to commemorate the war as a great victory.

By focusing research on whose victory, the aim is to study how the previous political stigmatization of communist victims turned into heroes. This requires examining war commemorations as contested realms where Chinese histories are shaped, allowing local communities space to reflect on the oscillating narratives of the regime. The communities, in this new wave of nationalism, strive to seek justice for WWII veterans and fallen soldiers who were victims of communist movements. This challenges the moral authority of the regime by exposing the wrongdoings in the repressive movement.

It underscores the role of Chinese citizens in defining what constitutes ideal citizenship and who holds power. If the dream is toward the future of the Chinese community, memory activists, who reflect on the instrumentalization of history and refuse to conform to the mainstream dream, instead reflect on the erased lived experiences of local and regional communities in official narratives.

DR. ANDREW CHUBB

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VECTORS OF GLOBAL NARRATIVES: THE ROLE OF PARTY ORGANS, DIASPORA AND MEDIA

There is no neat distinction between domestic and foreign-oriented actors behind the PRC's global narratives and influence campaigns. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda system that produces China's global media campaign is a core institution of the party's rule at home, and there has been a long-running debate over the degree of differentiation between internal propaganda and foreign-directed propaganda. On one hand, the party has at various times emphasized that in propaganda as in other areas of policy, there's a basic difference between what should be expressed internally and externally (内外有别). On the other hand, however, it's also recognized that many foreign observers closely analyze the party's domestic media discourse, and many Chinese people overhear its foreign-directed propaganda. As a result, ostensibly foreign-targeted media content often closely resembles the domestic discourse.

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is likewise primarily a domestic actor with key foreign-directed dimensions. Its core function is to cultivate and maintain the party's relationships with friendly elements outside the party and key target groups, including the eight non-oppositional minor parties, religious and ethnic minority leaders, business elites, students, intellectuals, and young professionals. It works primarily using methods of cooptation – bestowing prestige and providing access into the system – but it can also instrumentalize these allies to isolate and undermine those that the CCP considers enemies. Such targets include dissenters, independent religious groups, and ethnic minorities who are seen as resistant to the party's version of “Chineseness”. This work is carried out all over China, but the UFWD also has an increasing external role, especially in Xi Jinping's “New Era”.

In the space between united front and propaganda, there exists also a huge network of overseas Chinese-language media outlets serving diaspora communities. The party-state seeks to control this overseas Chinese discourse in two main ways. The first is by providing benefits including free content and other sources of revenue to overseas Chinese media who align with the CCP politically, or at least steer clear of Beijing's red lines on Taiwan's independence and the status of Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong. The second is by organizing punishment of those who do more independent coverage or voice critical views, often by mobilizing the UFWD network to isolate and deny advertising revenues that sustain them.

The Ministry of State Security (MSS) and Ministry of Public Security (MPS) are also primarily domestic actors that have responsibility for influence campaigns abroad. The MSS's primary goal is domestic state security, but this also increasingly has global dimensions. In particular, campaigns of transnational repression in which PRC security services target dissidents, human right defenders and others that are seen to pose a threat, including most of the Uyghur diaspora communities in many countries. Very often this is implemented through pressure on family members inside the PRC's borders. Local police services in the MPS system often implement these campaigns of coercion-by-proxy. The transnational repression cases that the US FBI has brought in recent years, as well as the “overseas police service stations” uncovered by the NGO Safeguard Defenders, have very often involved local municipal police forces from a given city or even district operating abroad. These may reflect the fact that overseas Chinese communities that they're looking to influence and coerce are often concentrated in terms of where they come from in China.

There is a need to be wary about terminology. Understanding such campaigns as “Chinese influence” can be quite misleading, as there's little that's traditionally Chinese about them; conceptually, the united front is a 20th century Leninist invention, centered on a theory of the vanguard party that has no history in China's political tradition. And of course, Chinese cultural influence abroad is much broader, and much more benign, than CCP influence. Why does this matter? As Confucius said, naming things (especially abstract things) is very important to deal with them properly in a practical sense.

We also need to distinguish between the UFWD, which is one of the party's core departments, and the “great patriotic united front” that it seeks to create and maintain. UFWD work is carried out by the party, but the various actors within the UFWD itself are its targets — they are, by definition, not the party but its allies. The UFWD itself works abroad primarily through the Councils for the Promotion of the Peaceful (Re-) Unification of China (和统会 / 统促会). These in turn serve as an umbrella for organizations, such as friendship groups, hometown associations, religious/cultural organizations and business chambers.

For these party allies overseas, affiliation opens up business and networking opportunities in China, in exchange for making sure their members don't pose a threat to Beijing, and helping give voice to Beijing's positions on key issues including Taiwan, the South China Sea, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Chinese diaspora communities are, of course, not a singular group. In many countries there have been multiple waves of migration – including those who left China before the PRC was even founded in 1949, those who fled afterwards – plus various targets of CCP repression since then. As a result, many members of Chinese diaspora communities are very critical of the party-state's wrongdoings. The relevant party-state organs - UFWD, external propaganda – do their best to present the Chinese diaspora as a singular, unified mass that all unwaveringly supports the party-state's line. This is a core aspect of UF Work. The reality is far more complex.

One explicitly external-facing party platform is the International Liaison Department (ILD). Traditionally it's been about party-party diplomacy in the Communist world (ie. mainly North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba), but in recent years it's been increasing forward-leaning in relations with other parts of the world. There isn't much evidence to suggest that International Liaison Department (ILD) and MFA are competing, they are better understood as two platforms within the overall Foreign Affairs system (外事系统). This is evident from the fact that Xi Jinping has placed career diplomats in charge of the ILD, most recently Liu Jianchao, and before him Song Tao. The increasing prominence of the ILD reflects Xi's instructions that officials in the foreign affairs system are first and foremost party cadres.

Since the Hu Jintao era, external-facing units within the propaganda system including China Global Television Network (CGTN), and Xinhua's foreign-language services, have seen massive investments into their international reach to try to build “discourse power.” This has enabled them to be covering parts of the world where the western media are absent, particularly in the Global South. The latest developments in the 2020s has been the establishment of “International Communication Centers” and the use of semi-independent “media studios” that produce content on platforms like X, Tiktok and Substack.

There is mixed evidence on the degree of success the CCP's campaigns are having in shaping global narratives. On one hand, a lot of PRC propaganda seems poorly attuned to international audiences, coming across as wordy and shrill when the news concerns China, while the need to steer clear of controversy means the content is often not very compelling. It is safest for these organs to align their content with internal propaganda lines intended for Chinese audiences. But on the other hand, we may be seeing an increasing differentiation of audience-targeting, and there is certainly a great willingness on the part of PRC propaganda organs to embrace new media, new content formats and new technologies. Tracking how the campaign unfolds is a key goal of the Global Public Opinion on China project at Asia Society, which brings together worldwide survey data on China across various dimensions.



SESSION 2: WHAT PATTERNS OF GLOBAL CHANGE EMERGE FROM CHINA'S RISE?

Mandates and Multilateralism: China's Power Play at the United Nations

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY AMB. RUCHIRA KAMBOJ

(FORMER AMBASSADOR AND PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF INDIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS AT NEW YORK; FORMER AMBASSADOR OF INDIA TO BHUTAN)

Since its “great restoration” to the United Nations (UN) in 1971, China has pursued a deliberate, disciplined strategy of embedding itself within the multilateral system. Five decades later, that effort has matured into formidable influence across institutional, financial and narrative domains. As a Permanent Member of the Security Council, China combines its veto power — exercised over 20 times, mostly since the 2000s — with growing assertiveness in shaping outcomes on peace, sanctions and mandates. It has moved from reticence to activism, from silent observer to rule-shaper.

China's financial contribution to the UN has risen from barely one percent at entry to a position among the top funders of the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets today, only two points behind the United States. This fiscal weight has translated into greater say in budgetary priorities and programmatic direction across agencies. Uniquely among the P5, China is a significant troop contributor to UN peacekeeping operations — with a particularly strong presence in Africa.

This dual role, as both veto-wielder and boots-on-the-ground actor, lends Beijing a moral and operational edge within the system. Chinese nationals now occupy senior posts across the UN system, notably in UN DESA, as well as a wide network of professional and junior positions (JPOs). These placements have created a pipeline of influence — from policy desks in New York to field missions worldwide.

Beijing has also invested heavily in discursive influence, introducing language such as “win-win cooperation” and promoting frameworks like the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). These seek to infuse UN resolutions and reports with Chinese priorities, often met with quiet resistance but persistent negotiation.

China today is a systemic player, not an occasional participant. Through patient investment, disciplined diplomacy, and conceptual framing, it has taken the UN seriously — and it shows. Its footprint runs deep: from peacekeeping to programming, from budgets to ideas.

The full remarks of this keynote may be accessed on ORCA's official YouTube channel under the heading of *ORCA's Global Conference on New Sinology 2025 | China's 'Dream' for a New Mandate of Power* or by searching for the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrNiXbNKjQI>

CONCEPT OF ADDRESS BY ORCA

This keynote examines how China leverages its position within the UN system—the Security Council, peacekeeping roles and leadership in agencies like WHO, FAO, UNESCO and ITU—to consolidate global influence and reshape international norms. It explores how Beijing challenges liberal multilateralism by embedding its political logic within global institutions. It also invites reflection on normative contestation/agenda setting within these institutions and how China has sought to reshape global governance architectures from within. The speaker will reflect on these shifts from the vantage point of India's own multilateral diplomacy, offering insights into how rising contestations over mandates and norms are redefining the future of global order.





PANEL DISCUSSION 3

INDIA-CHINA IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE CONTEST FOR A NEW MANDATE

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

This panel will evaluate both India and China's evolving foreign policy approaches towards the Global South and explore how their strategic doctrines shape their political, economic and ideological engagements within the region. As both countries seek to present themselves as champions of Southern interests in a shifting global order, their policies are increasingly tested not only within proximate regions but also in more distant theatres of influence. Moving beyond simplistic binaries of great power rivalry, this panel will interrogate the strategic choices, institutional instruments, and narrative tools deployed by both states to project leadership, craft legitimacy and institutionalize their presence. At the same time, the panel also assesses the agency of Global South actors highlighting how such countries are strategizing amidst Competing developmental frameworks as well as how local elites, institutions and informal networks navigate, adapt to or contest these overtures.

MR. RATISH MEHTA - MODERATOR

(Senior Research Associate, Organisation for Research on China and Asia)

INDIA, CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In the past few years, the term Global South has transitioned away from being on the peripheries of international order towards the centre of global discourse. A large part of this transition can be ascribed to the fact that the geographical blocking, constitutes a major portion of the global population and contributes almost half of the world's GDP share in purchasing power terms. But with that said, there continues to be no universally accepted definition of the countries that belong in the Global South category which raises important questions about the political, economic and social nature of the grouping.

Nonetheless within this evolving landscape, India and China stand out as pivotal players and two economic powerhouses of our times. Both countries at their individual level have significantly invested in projecting the Global South as part of a core foreign policy tenant. China for instance continues to invest materially within countries of the developing world while New Delhi is largely utilizing its position as a bridge between both the North and the South. But more importantly there are also increased demands from the developing world for cooperation between both the countries especially since relationships have largely remained contentious since the Galwan clash of 2020. Together they account for almost two-fifths of the Global South's population and a large share of its output. Their approaches mix competition and cooperation; China's Belt and Road have poured unprecedented resources into infrastructure and trade links across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while India's development partnerships, through concessional finance, capacity building and initiatives like the Voice of the Global South Summit, have stressed affordability and voice for emerging economies. At times the two economic powerhouses have also collaborated in forums such as BRICS or the G20 while at others they

have competed for influence, legitimacy and the power to frame development pathways.

It is against this backdrop that this panel asks how these two rising powers craft strategies, deploy institutions, and shape narratives in pursuit of a new mandate for the South and how countries across the South exercise agency in response. The discussions as part of this panel in many ways will offer insights into how both India and China are approaching the Global South but more importantly also weigh in on what the Global South seeks from both these countries.

DR. BHAGYA SENARATNE

(Director of Education, Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka)

THE GLOBAL SOUTH'S STRATEGY AMIDST COMPETING DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORKS: THE CASE OF SRI LANKA

Countries in the Global South face immense pressure in navigating the developmental frameworks laid out by larger and more powerful countries. At times, these developmental initiatives clash, such as the policies of China, India and the United States, resulting in smaller countries having to either walk on eggshells in engaging with these countries or in negotiating with them.

Sri Lanka is one such small country that has had to safely navigate the competing developmental framework and strategies implemented by China, India and the United States. In April 2022, Sri Lanka announced a temporary suspension on its foreign debt payments, due to limited foreign reserves. At the time, Sri Lanka had a total of US\$ 51 billion in foreign debt to be paid, of which US\$ 4 billion needed to be paid in 2022 itself. It was then at the mercy of larger more powerful countries, such as Australia, China, India, Japan and the United States, to overcome the economic crisis. In my presentation, I examine the external dynamics of Sri Lanka's socio-economic crisis and discuss how global south economies like Sri Lanka manage against competing development frameworks and the support such economies receive.

At the time of default, Sri Lanka indicated that China, Japan and India are Sri Lanka's top three bilateral creditors at 52%, 19.5% and 12%, respectively. According to the creditors' list published by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, China has the largest volume of indirect exposure to Sri Lanka at US\$ 3,248 million, whilst Sri Lanka does not have such a liability with the other two top creditors. These concerns arise at a time when there are allegations that China is increasingly investing in smaller economies of the global south through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), pushing these countries into debt, creating a vicious cycle of dependence.

China's initial response to Sri Lanka's economic crisis was to donate food aid. Despite a history of being forthcoming and benevolent, China's response to Sri Lanka's crisis was unusual. Whilst showing a reluctance to directly restructure the loans it has given Sri Lanka, they provided loans to pay off existing commitments. China also expressed their displeasure in Sri Lanka's negotiations with the IMF, resulting in discussions with the Chinese slowing down. "China has done its best to help Sri Lanka not to default but sadly they went to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and decided to default" (Qi Zhenhong as cited in Aneez, 2022).

The United States supported Sri Lanka monetarily and through negotiations with the IMF. However, whilst providing aid programmes, its communications vis-à-vis assistance to Sri Lanka were directed at China, resulting in Sri Lanka becoming a battleground for these two global power's competing development frameworks and thinking. "The US, ... willing to ... work with Sri Lanka ... we would hope that the People's Republic of China ... would do the same" (Samantha Power as cited in Ceylon Today, 2022). Whilst criticising the PRC, the United States' actions indicate that it was attempting to re-engage Sri Lanka by providing financial assistance, as it was conscious that it created a vacuum by disengaging the island-state in previous years. Another key takeaway is that the United States assistance came through negotiations with multilateral institutions, such as the IMF, reflecting that the US is maintaining their hegemony and countries like Sri Lanka are at their mercy to overcome economic difficulties.

This illustrates that Sri Lanka is caught in between China, and the United States. Sri Lanka's negotiations with China would have been different, had it approached China before defaulting and consulting the IMF. The Sri Lankan case highlights the dilemmas smaller economies of the global south face, their continued reliance on Bretton Woods sources even as they attempt to diversify through China-led financial mechanisms.

In conclusion, engaging with global powers has led to Sri Lanka having to engage deeply with International Financial Institutions that do not understand the needs of Global South economies. Moreover, seeking assistance from larger more powerful states means that smaller economies of the Global South lose out on their ability to negotiate to their benefit. This diminishes the power smaller economies of the Global South exercise in the international system, increasing their chances of being crushed between differing developmental and ideological frameworks.

DR. ZHENG ANGUANG

(Professor and Director, Institute of International Studies, Nanjing University, China)

THE INDO-PACIFIC IN CHINA'S GLOBAL SOUTH IMAGINATION: NARRATIVES, INITIATIVES AND POWER

The Chinese government does not use the term Indo-Pacific, but Asia Pacific even today. One of the reasons is this term was forged by the US and Japan, whose purpose is to contain China. And this conception involved India, which is a Global South country. We must not view China-India relations within the context of China-US relations. This is an important aspect that would restrict the development of bilateral relations.

Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific is not just a geographic construct but a contested space of narratives, strategic initiatives and shifting power dynamics. China's engagement in this region reveals much about its aspirations, its partnerships and its evolving role in global governance.

China's discourse on the Indo-Pacific contrasts sharply with the U.S.-led "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). While Washington frames the region in terms of democracy and security alliances, Beijing promotes an alternative narrative "Asia for Asians" - a vision articulated by leaders like Xi Jinping, emphasizing autonomy from Western influence. The Conference on Interaction and Confidence (CICA)-Building Measures in Asia serves as a platform for this, where China advocates for security governance without U.S. intervention. However, this is different from American's Monroe Doctrine, which focuses on the leadership of the US in American continents. Another narrative of "Community of Shared Future" was operationalized during the 2022 China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting, where China proposed development aid and climate cooperation in the Pacific region. Similarly, Global Governance Initiative is recently proposed on the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in 2025. The initiative focuses on sovereign equality, international rule of law, multilateralism, people-centric approach and real results.

China's economic footprint in the Indo-Pacific is undeniable, with some flagship programs leading the charge. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should be counted as the most important amongst all initiatives. For example, Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port is a \$7.3 billion deep-sea port project, part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, ensures an alternative route for oil and gas, bypassing the Malacca Strait.

On the other hand, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) is focusing on both the development cooperation between the Global South countries and China which aids in Beijing's soft power projection. For example, China and Solomon Islands signed the Security Cooperation Pact in 2022. This agreement, following Solomon Island's diplomatic switch from Taiwan to Mainland China, marked a shift in Pacific security dynamics. Similarly, in the South Pacific region, the 'China-Fiji Shipping Route' is funded by Chinese loans, which strengthens trade ties, embedding China deeper into Pacific economies.

China's Indo-Pacific strategy is not purely economic—it is also about securing strategic stability. In 2017, China built the Djibouti Naval Base, which is its first overseas military base, securing shipping lanes and expanding PLA Navy (PLAN) operations in the Indian Ocean. In this regard, the modernization of the PLAN is one of the most important leverages to address the challenges from America's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Chinese Navy's power is rising very rapidly. China's third aircraft carrier just had its new milestone for the Chinese Navy. The J-15T, J-35 and KJ-600 carrier-based aircraft made their first EM catapult take-off and landing on the flight deck of CV-18, the Fujian.

Prime Minister Modi gave three key words for three pillars of SCO in his impressive speech in Tianjin Summit of SCO on September 1. The 3 key words are Security, Connectivity and Opportunity, also "SCO". These principles also apply for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. India and China, as two leading Global South countries, should play a more important role together as pillars of the geopolitical structure of the Indo-Pacific region.

DR. YANITHA MEENA LOUIS

(Analyst, Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia)

**PERSPECTIVES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH: NAVIGATING THE CONTOURS OF INDIA AND CHINA'S
ENGAGEMENT IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD**

The term Global South remains contested, often described as backward or reductionist, but for many Southeast Asian countries, particularly Malaysia, it provides a useful conceptual space to articulate shared challenges, priorities and opportunities. The idea has served as a unifying framework for collective mobilization amid increasing geopolitical uncertainty. In this context, India has emerged as a natural partner. This was evident in the lead-up to India's G20 Summit, with initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit that sought to foreground the concerns of developing nations.

The G20 Summit itself reaffirmed India's commitment to building a more connected and representative Global South, most notably through the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member. It also introduced initiatives that addressed pressing challenges unique to developing countries, such as the Global Biofuel Alliance.

However, the momentum generated around the G20 has not been sustained. India's Global South discourse in Southeast Asia has gradually receded since the summit, raising questions about the extent to which New Delhi intends to position itself as a consistent and trusted mobiliser, let alone a leader, of the Global South.

China, by contrast, has continued to advance its Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), all of which directly target Global South audiences. This juxtaposition invites reflection on how Southeast Asia perceives India's engagement within this evolving landscape.

From a Southeast Asian perspective, India's Global South outreach is seen as deliberate and conscious. It does not derive from antagonism toward the Global North but rather from an effort to engage developing countries on shared terms and priorities. Its approach is measured, not coercive or overbearing, but also not sufficiently robust. As observed, India's language and narratives tend to oscillate with shifting foreign policy imperatives, resulting in a strategy vulnerable to dilution and inconsistency.

Moreover, several India-led initiatives that address issues closely associated with the Global South such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), and Global Biofuel Alliance (GBA) have seen limited engagement from Southeast Asian and ASEAN countries. This low participation is puzzling. Some analysts suggest that bureaucratic hurdles and overlaps with domestic or regional initiatives have constrained deeper cooperation.

One underutilized strength for India lies in its active membership across multilateral frameworks that hold special relevance for Global South countries, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and BIMSTEC. These platforms present significant opportunities for India to advance inter-regionalism, arguably a core feature of a new-age Global South mobilisation. Yet, their potential remains underexploited, with limited visibility of India's engagement in joint statements, official narratives, or media coverage related to Southeast Asia.

Even within larger groupings such as BRICS, whose renewed prominence has paralleled the resurgence of Global South discourse, it is arguably India and not China that provides the "balance" within the grouping. This was reflected in Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's remarks during his address at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), which acknowledged India's constructive role. India's mobilization efforts are distinctive precisely because they do not exclude or disregard the role of the Global North in addressing Global South challenges illustrated, for example, by its participation in the Quad.

The differences between the Indian and Chinese approaches are particularly relevant for Southeast Asia. China's strategy often leverages antagonism toward the West, presenting itself as an "alternative" to Western models of development and governance. This narrative can be effective but tends to fluctuate with changing global dynamics. India, in contrast, does not subscribe to the "we are the alternative" framing, a choice that can be both an asset and a limitation.

China is also more assertive and uninhibited in using desired language within joint statements and communiqués, something India has generally avoided. This linguistic caution is seen in Southeast Asia as a weakness, as it prevents India from projecting the necessary agency to lead Global South mobilization—both in multilateral and bilateral contexts. The Malaysian experience reflects this: while India's initiatives are welcomed, their articulation in official documents often lacks the assertiveness that could amplify their impact.

Conversely, India's ability to engage with Global North enterprise makes its Global South outreach more inclusive and less antagonistic. Yet, this approach can sometimes appear ambiguous within the Global South context, occasionally interpreted as "fraternizing with the enemy." When the Global South narrative is not implicitly framed as addressing Western disillusionment, it risks losing its mobilizing momentum.

From a Southeast Asian standpoint, India's key challenge is to clarify whether it seeks to be an alternative to the West or a bridge between the two worlds. India can indeed position itself as an alternative in select niche areas, but this will require structured, consistent engagement and sustained visibility. First, greater attention must be paid to semantics, articulation and narratives, India's official statements should more prominently highlight its leadership in Global South initiatives. Second, a compatibility assessment of Indian-led initiatives within Southeast Asia is essential to ensure alignment with regional priorities and existing frameworks. India must also be more attuned to how it is perceived within contentious groupings such as the Quad and BRICS+, and strategically leverage that perception to make these mechanisms more palatable to the region. Finally, inter-regionalism should lie at the heart of India's Global South strategy. Deepening functional linkages between ASEAN and platforms such as IORA and BIMSTEC would not only enhance India's credibility as a mobiliser but also reinforce its position as a connector across regions, a role increasingly valued in Southeast Asia's evolving strategic outlook.

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INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY AND THE GEOECONOMICS OF ITS GLOBAL SOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The theme of this Conference, "China's Dream for a New Mandate of Power," raises two key questions: first, whether this dream is sustainable and achievable; and second—central to this panel—how countries like India should respond to China's quest for a new mandate of power. Before turning to India's response, it is important to briefly address the first question. Whether China can legitimize its claim to global leadership depends on a combination of strategic, economic, military, and technological factors. The September 3 parade in Beijing offered tangible demonstrations of this ambition through advanced military capabilities and modernized platforms.

As far as the intangibles are concerned, China's leadership continues to emphasize its commitment to a rules-based international order. A recent example is Xi Jinping's proposal of the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tianjin. The initiative promotes principles such as sovereign equality, respect for international law, and multilateralism to build what Beijing describes as a "more just" global order. Through such measures, Xi has positioned China as a voice of the Global South, condemning power politics and advocating uniform application of international norms.

It is important to note that China's quest for legitimacy is strengthened by Mr. Trump's extraordinary commitment to the "America First" doctrine at the cost of international rules and commitments. The first few months of his current term have demonstrated a total disregard for alliance partners and allies which has raised serious questions about the ability and willingness of the US to lead the world. In its quest for global leadership and legitimacy, China could not have found a better ally than Mr. Trump.

Turning to the second question on how India is engaging with the Global South and how its engagement compares with China's? It is clear that both countries are actively vying for influence across developing regions, but through markedly different approaches. China today is the world's largest trading power and the largest trading partner for more than 120 countries, over 90 percent of which belong to the Global South. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now covers approximately 150 countries, including around 120 from the developing world, with cumulative investments exceeding one trillion dollars. These initiatives have provided China with immense leverage across the Global South, particularly through hard infrastructure and connectivity projects.

India obviously cannot match the scale of China's interventions especially in hard infrastructure, so it is more focused on four key areas.

India, while unable to match the scale of China's interventions, has sought to distinguish its engagement through a focus on equitable partnerships, capacity building, technology diffusion, and institutional reform, an approach it terms "Reformed Multilateralism." Four areas particularly reflect this strategy: trade policy, technology transfer, capacity building, and financial instruments.

India has been a relatively late entrant into the domain of free trade agreements (FTAs) but has been steadily expanding its network. It has signed 14 FTAs, primarily with developing countries or regional groupings such as SAFTA, MERCOSUR, and ASEAN, covering roughly 25–30 percent of its total merchandise trade. While these bilateral arrangements are imperfect substitutes for large multilateral frameworks, they nonetheless facilitate regional value chains and trade integration.

China's leadership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership gives it a distinct advantage in regional value chains. India, having opted out, lacks comparable reach. To bridge this gap, India could explore larger plurilateral agreements—such as participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership or deeper engagement with the African Continental Free Trade Area, which brings together 54 member states. Additionally, India offers duty-free and quota-free access to 33 least developed countries across nearly 98 percent of its tariff lines, reinforcing its developmental outreach.

Technology transfer has become a defining feature of India's contemporary Global South engagement. Through initiatives such as the Global South Science and Technology Initiative, India shares expertise in sectors including digital governance, renewable energy, agriculture, and space technology.

The most significant effort in this domain is the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Initiative, anchored in the "India Stack", a suite of interoperable systems including Aadhaar (digital identity), UPI (digital payments), DigiLocker (document storage), and ONDC (open e-commerce). Offered as an open-source global public good, the DPI model promotes digital inclusion, financial access, and transparent governance. India has signed Memoranda of Understanding with over 50 countries, primarily in the Global South, to share these technologies at no cost. Several of these countries have already adopted or customized UPI systems to suit local needs.

India's flagship Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme remains one of its most enduring instruments of Global South engagement. Since 1964, over 200,000 professionals, primarily from developing countries, have received training under this initiative. Approximately 10,000 training slots are offered annually in Indian institutions.

Recent expansions include the India-UN Global Capacity Building Initiative, a partnership with UN agencies to deliver specialized training in digital skills, governance, and disaster management. These programs contribute to India's reputation as a knowledge and training hub for the developing world. Through the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS), India provides concessional Lines of Credit (LoCs) via the Export-Import Bank of India. To date, India has committed over \$32 billion across more than 300 LoCs to 68 countries, completing more than 320 projects in sectors such as energy, transport, agriculture, and healthcare.

In Africa, LoCs have financed projects in 42 countries, including power plants in Sudan, Burundi, and Rwanda; sugar factories in Ethiopia and Malawi; and technology parks in Mozambique and Côte d'Ivoire. In South Asia, they have supported railway upgrades in Bangladesh and the construction of the Hanimaadhoo International Airport in the Maldives. These mechanisms are viewed as sustainable alternatives to high-interest, non-transparent lending models and reinforce India's image as a reliable development partner.

Collectively, these instruments seek to craft a new political economy of influence by prioritizing equitable partnerships over dominance. They enable India to compete with China for leadership, secure resources and markets, and advocate for reforms in global institutions, ultimately fostering a multipolar order where the Global South drives its own development narrative.



BEYOND BORDERS, ACROSS WATERS: CHINA'S STRATEGIC MEDIATION AND MARITIME POWER PROJECTION

CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE BY ORCA

This dialogue unpacks how China's diplomatic engagements in continental conflict zones and its maritime infrastructure expansion are part of a coherent strategy of influence projection. It explores the dual strategies through which China is reshaping its external relations: through conflict mediation diplomacy across geopolitical hotspots and the material expansion of maritime influence. The session traces how Beijing is positioning itself as a neutral peacemaker in conflicts spanning the Middle East, South Asia, Africa and Northeast Asia—mediating border disputes, civil wars and insurgencies with a carefully managed image of constructive neutrality. At the same time, China's maritime expansion—via infrastructure development, forward deployments and lawfare—has rendered oceans as theatres of sovereignty assertion and geoeconomic control, and has evoked multi-pronged responses from Southeast Asian countries. The conversation critically engages with the normative, spatial, and strategic logics behind these practices. It evaluates the extent to which China's mediation efforts are genuinely stabilizing or strategically instrumentalized to gain long-term footholds, while juxtaposing these with the coercive and infrastructural mechanisms through which maritime access and authority are consolidated. Together, the dialogue highlights how China's approach to diplomacy is no longer confined to the realm of words and treaties, but is deeply interwoven with physical geography and maritime presence.

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We are all familiar with the issues that typically put China in the headlines: its economic rise and its increasingly capable military power. Yet over the past few years, China has been getting attention for something that, not long ago, might have seemed almost unthinkable: its growing role as a mediator of international conflict.

In March 2023, Beijing surprised the world by quietly brokering a landmark agreement between longtime regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, helping the two countries restore diplomatic ties after years of hostility. This was not an isolated incident. Just before the Saudi/Iran deal, China unveiled a 12-point peace plan for Ukraine. In fact, over the last few years, China has rolled out a series of ambitious peace initiatives, offering a five-point plan for Middle East peace, a four-point proposal on Syria, a three-point vision for resolving the Israel-Gaza conflict, and twelve-point proposal for Ukraine, to name a few.

Chinese diplomats have also been working behind the scenes to help mediate disputes in conflict zones across the globe, from countries on China's border like Myanmar and Afghanistan to more distant crises in Ethiopia and Sudan. And, of course, Beijing recently launched the International Organization for Mediation in Hong Kong, creating a new platform intended to rival existing Western-dominated platforms and institutionalize China's role in global peace efforts.

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has elevated mediation as a tool of Chinese statecraft and a way to raise China's global status.

To understand Beijing's embrace of conflict mediation, we need to look at the way China's perception of the global security environment and the threats to Chinese interests have changed over the last 25 years, with a focus on three particular shifts.

First: economic exposure. Since the "Go Out" policy of the early 2000s, Chinese businesses, especially state-owned enterprises, have expanded globally, often into unstable environments where few others would go. By the 2010s, Chinese investments were embedded across Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The Belt and Road Initiative turbocharged this trend, leaving Chinese assets vulnerable to unrest and war in countries around the world.

Second: reputation management. In the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, Beijing experienced firsthand how global outrage, such as the backlash over its support for Sudan during the Darfur crisis, could damage its soft power ambitions. In the process, China discovered that mediation could be used tactically to neutralize reputational risks. And in recent years, China has embraced mediation as a way to craft a global image of benevolence and leadership, especially in the Global South.

Third: strategic vulnerability. The 2011 NATO intervention in Libya shook China's leaders and was a wake-up call for Beijing about the risks of having a global footprint without the tools to protect Chinese interests. In just ten days, China evacuated over 35,000 nationals. It was the largest and most complex evacuation operation in the history of the People's Republic of China up to that point, and it revealed the scale of Chinese overseas expansion, the vulnerabilities that came with it, and the limits of China's traditional non-interventionist stance.

Since then, China has grown more comfortable stepping in diplomatically; this is not out of altruism, but to prevent costly surprises.

This strategic recalibration culminated in the 2014 Comprehensive National Security Concept, which expanded national security beyond military issues to include political, economic, and even ideological dimensions. A central concept driving the CNSC is that external instability can pose serious risks to internal security. In this light, China's growing involvement in international conflict mediation is not just about diplomacy and boosting China's image, but rather a means of protecting domestic stability. So, as you can see, China's conflict mediation efforts are not isolated goodwill missions. They are both a tactical tool and a strategic expression of China's evolving national security doctrine and increasingly baked into China's strategic initiatives.

China is also using the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to advance an alternative security model that presents China as a global stabilizing force for the world. China has made its conflict mediation efforts a key operational pillar of the GSI by framing mediation as a contribution to a more just, inclusive, and stable international security order.

Yet it is important to note that China's model of mediation differs sharply from that of Western powers and what is often recognized as mediation best practices (including in UN guidance documents). For example, Beijing tends to favor facilitation over true mediation. It is more comfortable creating a space for dialogue than addressing and resolving core disputes. China often engages late in the process, once the hard work has been done by others. Finally, Beijing prioritizes stability and economic continuity, and generally prefers to deal with ruling elites or incumbent governments instead of civil society or non-state actors.

Finally, it is difficult to ignore the reputational disconnect: China's desire to establish its image as a responsible peacemaker is frequently undercut by its coercive behavior in the Taiwan Strait, its aggressive posture in the South China Sea, its history of selling arms to parties to the conflict itself, and its tacit support for Russia's war in Ukraine.

In summary, understanding China's role in conflict mediation means looking beyond the headlines and recognizing it as a strategic tool that reflects China's global ambitions as well as its deep concerns about vulnerability, legitimacy, and control in an unstable world.

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The ability of great powers to settle their own disputes or others disputes is crucial. In order to become a hegemon, whether it be a benevolent hegemon, global hegemon, or regional hegemon, a great power needs to be able to settle disputes. This isn't just because a hegemon needs to have some stabilizing role, it is also about managing disputes and confrontations. It is a key aspect of forming relationships in a region and shaping the future trajectory of a region. Another important point about dispute settlement is that typical conflict behaviour, like coercion or grey-zone coercion in the case of China and cooperation and negotiating disputes, are not mutually exclusive opposites. Both belong together.

One way in which coercion and bargaining come together in the South China Sea is that China's insistence on excessive claims, that an arbitral tribunal declared invalid, puts a lot of pressure on Southeast Asian states to negotiate with China. In the absence of such claims, the Philippines would not have negotiated joint hydrocarbon development projects, or arrangements for fisheries, or more recently, modalities of the resupply missions to the Second Thomas Shoal, which is one of the features in the Spratly Islands. China's land reclamation in the Spratly islands is important for the conflict at lower levels of violence. They allow for Coast Guard simultaneous and more frequent patrols in many parts of the South China Sea. As a result, the forceful insistence on excessive claims results in dilemmas for Filipino diplomats, who can either resist these pressures, like they did in Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and risk the pretext for China to take control of a feature. On the other hand, they could negotiate with China about various types of arrangements, which is what the Philippines has been doing in the past. This has its own problems.

We have the benefit of looking at the three decades of negotiations between China and the Philippines, China and Vietnam, China and Japan and others like Malaysia and Indonesia, especially in the context of the Code of Conduct. In the East China Sea there are a number of fisheries agreements that are effective enough so that Japan has an interest in keeping these agreements. In the South China Sea, there aren't such agreements. To understand this, one point that is missing is a variation of the idea that bargaining and conflict exist together. The essential experience of Southeast Asian countries is that cooperative arrangements with China in SCS can result in vulnerabilities for them by increasing China's bargaining power advantage. For example, in the case of the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU), an arrangement for seismic research, the geographic scope applied to areas China cannot legally claim. It was alleged that the Chinese contractor found potential gas deposits in areas close to the Philippines coastline but didn't share all the data. In this case, the data-sharing arrangement provided a bargaining advantage for China.

But this experience has not prevented the Philippines from seeking further practical arrangements with China, due to the continuous pressure they face. However, the negotiation position of the Philippines has changed especially after the South China Sea arbitration award. Now the Philippines insists that all resource sharing arrangements must follow domestic laws. The JMSU is an example of how cooperation can be an extension of conflict behaviour, which results in vulnerabilities an adversary can leverage. This problem doesn't just apply to smaller countries, it applies to larger countries and all kinds of agreements relating to fisheries, crisis communication and resource sharing. Does this mean that the various options for ocean governance are off the table in the South China Sea?

It means dispute settlement is subject to conditions. A few conditions for successful dispute settlement in the South China Sea can be mentioned. First, regarding political conditions, Southeast Asian countries believe that practical arrangements with China will not satisfy China's claims. In fact, they fear they will increase China's power. What is lacking is a clear commitment from China that if Southeast Asian countries agree on any of China's proposals, China's claims would be satisfied. Moreover, what is lacking is a Chinese commitment to reduce pressure on Southeast Asian countries if they accept any form of resource sharing. The experience of the past thirty years suggests that China will not be able to move forward without any such commitment.

Going back to the ability or inability to settle disputes in the South China Sea; a major barrier for China becoming the pre-eminent power in the region is disputes in the South China Sea. A limit to China taking full advantage of the Trump administration is its own disputes in the South China Sea and its inability to commit to the conditions that would make cooperative maritime agreements a reality. But one should not only look at just China's own activities. Southeast Asian responses to China matter. These can be described as coalition-building around the arbitral award of 2016. Before 2016, Southeast Asian

claimants did not have a common position on the maximum allowed maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, and nor did they have any common minimum demand in negotiations with China. So, what we can observe now is the emergence of a coalition of claimants and non-claimant states centred on the South China Sea arbitration. In the absence of the ability to solve maritime disputes, a countervailing coalition is emerging. In conclusion, we can see how the ability or inability to settle disputes, to steer disputes in a certain direction, is key to becoming a hegemon.





POWER, LEGITIMACY AND THE DOMESTIC FOUNDATIONS OF CHINA'S GLOBAL STRATEGY

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

China's global ambitions are increasingly rooted in a domestic narrative of rejuvenation, innovation and strategic coherence under Xi Jinping's leadership. This panel interrogates the interplay between internal legitimacy building and external projection of power, unpacking how the Party-State crafts and sustains China's rise through intertwined political, economic, legal and military instruments. The "China Dream" serves not only as an ideological anchor but also as a legitimizing force that binds the populace to the Party's strategic goals. Simultaneously, China is constructing digital corridors of influence that mirror by investing in submarine cables and data centres in efforts to strengthen its hold on the global digital commons. These efforts are propelled by a techno-nationalist governance model that promotes Chinese standards and cultivates 'invisible interdependencies'. At the strategic level, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) plays a crucial role in operationalizing the Party's vision through the Global Security Initiative, functioning as both a deterrent and an instrument of influence. Together, this panel discussion will explore how China's global strategy is fundamentally underpinned by efforts to consolidate domestic authority.

MR. RAHUL KARAN REDDY - MODERATOR

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FRAMING DOMESTIC POWER AS THE BEDROCK OF CHINA'S GLOBAL STRATEGY

The study of China's domestic political, economic and military fundamentals is indispensable for understanding its international behavior and strategic posture. Much of the global discourse surrounding China's rise tends to focus on its outward-facing initiatives—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its growing assertiveness in sub-regions around the world, foreign policy posture or its expanding participation in global governance through frameworks such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI).

These external manifestations are principally rooted in the internal configuration of power and approach to national power capabilities constructed within China. The key to understanding and deconstructing China's strategic ambitions and international behaviour lies in the domestic political structure, economic policy instruments, military capabilities and technological advancements supporting Beijing's grand strategy.

At the heart of China's rise is Xi Jinping's domestic political vision of the "China Dream of national rejuvenation". Domestically, the China Dream reinforces the Party's legitimacy and power by projecting collective national revival; internationally, it articulates the moral and civilizational resurgence of China as a global power. It is also a guiding, governing principle underpinning China's developmental strategy, institutional reform and economic opening-up.

China's global projection is also inseparable from its infrastructure-centric development model, which is making progress in advancing China's appeal in the Global South. Through large State-Owned Enterprises involved in construction, banking and insurance and supported by industrial policy, the state has leveraged infrastructure as both a domestic economic stimulant which drives growth, integrates regions, and expands governance capacity. The same model in sub-regions around the world underpins the Belt and Road Initiative, an outlet for excess capacity and capital, cultivates China's influence through a variety of diplomatic, economic and political channels. More recently, we've seen the rise of digital connectivity where Beijing's ambitions and capacities coalesce around the initiatives like the Digital Silk Road (DSR) to build digital platforms, 5G networks, e-commerce ecosystems and surveillance technologies.

In a way, the DSR reflects China's domestic policy planning goals for technology self-reliance and competitiveness, and its global expansion and market capture objectives. The cultivation of firms like Huawei, Alibaba and Tencent as strategic enterprises supports the export of China's governance models and shape norms of digital governance, data security and privacy. In this context, subsea cables are fast becoming a flashpoint for commercial competition as well as a security risk.

Another domain we see the fusion of the domestic and external is China's approach to and application of national unity. To project power externally maintaining national unity within its vast and diverse territory is vitally significant. In that context, ethnic governance in Xinjiang and Tibet in particular, reflects concerns about stability, external interference and cross-border flows of people and ideas. The policy approach relating to national unity takes on external facets, which explain China's emphasis on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Beijing's Central Asia policy. The application of China's approach to national unity also finds a place in how China projects its status as a civilizational state to global audiences. It also reinforces certain aspects of China's security thinking and global security posture.

China's nascent but growing security architecture and the modernization of its armed forces is also a key component of China's domestic development and global strategy. Through structural reforms and technological advancements, China is expanding the PLA's ability to participate in overseas operations, peacekeeping and global security governance. The GSI in particular is an important component of China's effort to protect overseas assets, secure maritime routes and advance its strategic ambitions.

China's global strategy cannot be interpreted without locating it within the domestic foundations of economic and social policy, political culture and military capability. Moreover, the future of China's domestic development will increasingly impact not just China's external actions, but also the global economy and international politics.

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REIMAGINING POWER: THE NARRATIVE OF XI'S CHINA DREAM

The Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have since the 18th Party Congress articulated an organizing principle, a story – the 'China Dream', to spiritually inspire the people of China to realize their most cherished dream of 'national rejuvenation'. China Dream, when first articulated by President Xi at an exhibition "The Road to Rejuvenation" on 29 November, 2012, was articulated as a dream of the Chinese people who had succeeded in becoming the masters of their destiny.

At the 18th Party Congress, on behalf of the 17th Central Committee, Hu Jintao presented a report titled "Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects", and at the First Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee Xi Jinping stated that, "The baton of history has been passed to us. We must not fail".

China Dream, a story scripted by the collective central leadership with Xi Jinping as its General Secretary, launched a campaign of theoretical and practical innovation to progressively lift the curtain on a new era for socialism with Chinese characteristics. The plan to manifest this dream – national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, is through the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. Beijing now officially realizes that China is in the primary stage of socialism. The "Concise History of The Communist Party of China" articulates the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the socialist system with

Chinese characteristics as the fundamental accomplishment of the Party through a century of arduous struggle.

While concept of 'national rejuvenation' of the Chinese people lacks a definition and is considered an open concept that encompasses many of China's national objectives, including emancipating the mind, China's national rejuvenation is conditional upon to achieving two key objectives – bringing about a moderately prosperous society in all respects and building China into modern socialist country. The dream of national rejuvenation will then be realized following the accomplishment of these two objectives.

The concept of 'national rejuvenation', according to Xi Jinping, originates with the beginning of China's modern era in 1840's, a period of China's century of humiliation. In his speech at "The Road to Rejuvenation" on 29 November, 2012, Xi Jinping stated – "The yesterday of the Chinese nation can well be called "an impregnable pass like a wall of iron", this nation of ours suffered very gravely after the beginning of the modern era since 1840, we have struggled continuously, and have unfolded a brilliant prospect for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the territory of China".

In fact, unlike the narrative of associating national rejuvenation with China's national experience of the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, the concept of national rejuvenation originates during the second decade of the 20th century. The concept of national rejuvenation was first articulated by Li Dazhao, co-founder of the Communist Party of China.

Li Dazhao, unlike Chen Duxiu, was a Confucian by training and was less critical of Chinese tradition and culture, compared to other early nationalists in China. It was Li Dazhao's critical analysis of China's situation following the failure to form a political organization aligned with the western political thought, that called for national rejuvenation. In his analysis, Li Dazhao identified China's current situation to be rooted in the fact that China was an old nation with much of its traditional political thought and culture obsolete to address any of China's national problems. Hence, China needed to rejuvenate as a nation just like plants rejuvenate during the spring. National rejuvenation, according to the Party, stresses on China becoming a youthful nation by rediscovering the nation's spring time. National rejuvenation, therefore, represented the lack of faith and confidence in China's past. However, the concept in the New Era represents the conviction of the party leadership to achieve the most cherished dream of the Chinese people. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is the path through which the Party aims to achieve national rejuvenation.

Notably, Socialism or communism was not really articulated by Karl Marx, and is a dream left by him for mankind to pursue and realize. Furthermore, socialism is not antagonistic to capitalism which Karl Marx criticized after having enquired into its laws of motion to conclude that a capitalist mode of production with factors of production in the hands of private owners is an improbable social formation.

The 2008 global financial crisis, in fact, was an episode of a series of financial crises that originated in the 1970s and many such crises are expected to unfold in the near future. China through its opening-up and reforms of the late 1970s aimed to unleash productive forces and began facing similar challenges within five decades of economic reforms.

Socialism, as expected by Karl Marx was to be first realized by advanced capitalist societies. Yet, the October revolution (1917) in Russia motivated many nations including China to realize socialism even though they were faced with an unfavorable national situation. China now completely accepts Marxist-Leninist tenets and the foundations of a theory of societal development based on dialectical materialism and historical materialism, despite having made major blunders in the past. The narrative of China Dream conceals a dream in which mankind has the potential to graduate from a capitalist social formation to a more advanced social formation. More than the actual economic and political situation now unfolding in China, it is the conviction of the Chinese leadership to undertake socialist modernization with a century of arduous effort in both practice and theory that begs more scholarly attention.

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INFRASTRUCTURE, ACTORS AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

Life in the 21st century has become irreversibly dependent on the virtual world, which has shaped how we talk to each other, purchase goods and services, bank, get educated and also on how we commit crimes, how we spy on each other etc. All this is done via the Internet. Undersea cables are what are used to carry communications between countries. Undersea or subsea constitute about 99% of international internet traffic, not all internet traffic, but transcontinental or transnational traffic for islands. The rest of the world's international traffic is carried on satellite or via overland cables. These cables are the invisible arteries through which financial transactions, trade flows, defence communications, and social interactions move every second of the day.

Some countries such as Singapore aim to build up their status as a submarine cable hub. Singapore's perspective is that her prosperity, national security and aspiration to be an AI-ready nation all hinge on the continuous and secure functioning as well as sufficient capacity for undersea cables. Several applications and platforms showcase the criticality of undersea cables.

Take, for instance, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) global financial network that provides secure messaging services for banks and other financial institutions worldwide. SWIFT messaging services are financial transactions that anchor global trade. Every time someone transfers money, a SWIFT message is generated. Undersea cables globally carry over 53 million SWIFT messages daily. While SWIFT does not publish a public breakdown of how many SWIFT messages originate from each individual country, the fact that for example Mumbai and Hong Kong are both financial centres, hubs of trade, capital flows and banking, probably means that a significant amount of SWIFT business involves these two cities. No cables means no funds are transferred, which would lead to a significant impact on their positions as financial hubs.

Another example is the Artificial Intelligence (AI) boom that makes cables even more indispensable. Training large AI models requires the transfer of petabytes of data between global data centres. If a country does not host AI model training or inferencing, then researchers and companies would need to depend on low-latency, high-capacity cable links to access training resources in the US and Europe. Real-time AI model inferencing, such as fraud detection or predictive logistics, also requires seamless cable connectivity.

There are multiple challenges when it comes to cables: technical, legal, financial and some geopolitical. First, cable projects are extremely capital intensive and take years to complete; second, laying the cables, more importantly getting the territorial permits for the routes as well as landing points; third, obtaining the appropriate insurance to underwrite the installation of these cables; fourth, protecting the cables; fifth, threats facing these cables are not theoretical.

Globally, the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), which is an organisation whose aims are to protect the world's submarine cables, says there are about 200 cable faults occurring each year. Most of these are accidental, but some are suspected to be deliberate acts of sabotage, but unfortunately without conclusive evidence. Disruption, in particular from sudden or deliberate cuts, can have effects out of proportion to the invisibility of the cables: economic losses, disruption of services, possibly effects on governance or national security. Hence, there have been multiple military/legal/technology initiatives in recent years in the cable protection space, and also for repairing cables if there is any accidental or deliberate damage.

Before delving into the specific Chinese players in the market, firstly a quick overview of China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) initiative or *shùzì sīlù* (数字丝路). This is a term that, broadly speaking, encompasses various activities, technical, commercial and strategic, aimed at expanding and deepening the "digital infrastructure overseas cooperation to ensure network infrastructure connectivity". This would include, amongst other connectivity technologies, cross-border fibre optic cables to ensure network infrastructure interconnectivity. Projects like the PEACE (Pakistan & East Africa Connecting Europe) submarine cable are central to the DSR, linking China to Africa and Europe and offering economic benefits to participant countries.

These cable networks give China greater access to international data, expand the global reach of Chinese technology firms, and enhance China's influence over technology standards and international digital governance. The expansion of Chinese undersea cables through the DSR is viewed as both an effort to bridge digital gaps in developing regions and a strategic move to position China at the centre of global digital connectivity. There are strong links between undersea cable projects in China and the country's DSR.

Moreover, the biggest telecom players in China are the three state-backed giants known collectively as 'The Big Three'. China Mobile, which is the world's largest mobile operator by subscribers. It is also a global player, with investments in underseas cable projects and IoT services. China Telecom the leading fixed-line and broadband provider in China and a major force in enterprise services, cloud computing, and data centre operations. It also runs extensive international submarine cable networks. China Unicom is strong in mobile and fixed-line services, with some involvement in undersea cables. Then there is PCCW which is the Hong Kong-based mobile network, fixed network and also undersea cable operator. Currently, China has 24 publicly known undersea cables that are either already operational or are due to go into service soon. The majority of these cables have Chinese ownership, either partially or completely. These are only cables that land on mainland China, and cables landing in Hong Kong are not included in this number.

In addition to the Chinese operators, there are also massive Chinese vendors who supply equipment or provide turnkey engineering services for this market. The largest one is HMN Technologies (formerly known as Huawei Marine Networks).

The other up and coming vendors are the Hengtong Group and ZTT Submarine. There are other significant Chinese vendors such as Ningbo Orient Cable that provide undersea cables that supply high voltage Submarine Power Cables. In fact, China is one of the top 4 vendors of submarine cables and turnkey cable engineering services in the world, in addition to the US, France and Japan.

There are five challenge areas when it comes to global implications of China in the undersea cable market. The first is about protecting the cables. The SeaMeWe6 cable story is best suited to illustrate this point. Originally HMN was selected in early 2020 to manufacture and lay the cable and was able to offer a competitive price reportedly due to hefty subsidies from the Chinese Government. However, in 2023, US diplomatic pressure and threat of sanctions led the SeaMeWe6 massive cable project consortium to drop the Chinese vendor HMN over security concerns. The United States Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has introduced rules that ban companies from connecting undersea submarine communication cables to the US if those cables contain Chinese technology or equipment. These concerns have led to the cancellation of four planned cables between the US and Hong Kong. The FCC highlights both cyber and physical threats, emphasizing the importance of securing the world's undersea cables.

In 2024, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, 18 nations endorsed the New York Principles, a multilateral statement to promote secure cable providers, encourage public-private partnerships, and support resilient route planning. The full name of this statement is The New York Joint Statement on the Security and Resilience of Undersea Cables in a Globally Digitalized World. It was signed by the US as the proposer and the EU as an endorser and other Western allies as well as some of the Pacific Islands. The three Asian countries that have signed this are Singapore, Japan and Korea. The motivation was seen as trying to reduce dependence on "high-risk" suppliers, and improving resilience, often with China implicitly in mind as a source of potential risk. Subsequently the Chinese Foreign Ministry accused the US of "turning undersea cables into a political and security issue," denying countries "the right to develop their undersea cable industry and independently choose undersea cable suppliers."

The second challenge is funding these projects. Due to the capital-intensive nature of these projects, China has found a natural position by entering underfunded projects such as for small island states and in Africa. China has telecommunications cable infrastructure projects across Africa. This includes the 2Africa pan-African cable system where China Mobile is a consortium member. Similarly, the PEACE cable, headquartered in Hong Kong, connects Pakistan & East Africa with Europe.

The third challenge is laying the cables. China has reportedly either significantly delayed or outrightly refused to give permits to lay cables in most parts of the South China Sea, especially in waters it believes are under its sovereignty, namely the 9-dash line. Hence, alternate routes are being sought by some of the major cable operators to avoid the South China Sea altogether. As a result, cable operators are moving away from Hong Kong which used to be a major undersea cable hub. ASEAN countries are benefitting tremendously from this shift, as cables are landing on ASEAN shores as a result.

To summarise, undersea cables facilitate financial transactions, trade and communications and are central to China's DSR initiative, enhancing its influence in global digital governance. Major Chinese telecoms, known as The Big Three are big players in cable ownership and operations, with notable vendors like HMN Technologies. Challenges with cables include securing funding, obtaining territorial permits for cable laying and protecting against threats. Geopolitical tensions, especially with the US, have prompted scrutiny of Chinese technology in this domain, leading to increased competition for projects in less developed regions. The US has also introduced regulations limiting Chinese involvement in critical undersea cables, which may drive Chinese firms to target markets in South Asia and Africa.

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**NATIONAL UNITY AND POWER PROJECTION: ROLE OF ETHNIC GOVERNANCE IN CHINA'S
DIPLOMACY**

In the context of China's growing stature on the world stage, the imperative to understand the roots of its behaviour in international affairs grows ever stronger. Explanations for China's diplomatic choices often fall into two broad camps: defensive, whereby China engages with the outside world to gain security and stability; and offensive, which sees China as seeking to establish regional or global hegemony.

China's diplomacy cannot be fully understood without examining the role of ethnic governance—particularly how internal efforts to manage ethnic diversity and assert national unity shape external projections of power. Ethnic governance is not only a tool of domestic nation-building and national defence; it is also central to China's global contest over discourse power. The case of Tibet, in particular, reveals how China's internal narratives are tightly bound up with its international diplomacy, including direct confrontations with Western powers such as the United States. Through this lens, ethnic governance emerges as a vital and under-appreciated dimension of China's foreign policy strategy.

Firstly, ethnic governance is about nation-building and national rejuvenation based on unity. The imperative to unify China and its various ethnic groups stems from China's traumatic modern history of disunity. Early nationalists saw Chinese disunity as the cause of its inability to resist western imperialism. For example, the 'Father of the Republic', Sun Yat-sen, bemoaned his people as like sand in their passive fragmentation. And despite the promise of the 1911 revolution the following decades only saw more weakness and disunity with warlord rule, foreign invasion, collaboration and civil war.

Modern nation-building has often included projects to tame the peripheries. The post-Civil War United States saw efforts to force the submission of surrounding territories to the centre. In the 1870s, the new Meiji state in Japan embarked on a thoroughgoing programme of modernisation. One element of this was to tie once rather distant territories such as Hokkaido in the north and Okinawa in the south-west to the new central power. And in the early years of independent India, the new Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, regularly expressed his anxiety over how 'fissiparous' tendencies threatened the unity of the new state.

In the 20th century ethnic peripheries have often been a weak spot for China. Early in the century the British managed to wrest significant influence over Tibet from China. Later, in the 1960s, the USSR used Uyghur and Kazakh populations to destabilise the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Xinjiang borders to subvert Mao's state. And today Beijing fears Turkic and jihadist support for Uyghur dissidents and exile influence over Tibetans.

In 1949, when Chairman Mao pondered the strategic picture of his newly established PRC, he made the value of Tibet quite clear. Controlling that ethnic periphery would mean drawing a line of national defence along the Himalayas. Without that peripheral buffer, the border would fall only a few hundred kilometres west of the major population centre of Chengdu. In other words, ethnic governance was a key aspect of national defence. Hence, Beijing formulated an immediate plan for the integration of Tibet.

But ethnic governance is not only defence. Xinjiang today with its troubled ethnic diversity serves as a platform to project power into central Asia and via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor into the Indian Ocean. Nor is ethnic governance only about nation-building and national power in general.

Beyond territorial control, ethnic governance also plays a role in shaping China's global narrative — a form of soft power known as discourse power. Discourse power is about whose narratives circulate most prominently and what interpretations of events are accepted. Xi Jinping has explicitly addressed this issue in terms of China's international power using terms like *huayuquan* (话语权) or 'telling China's story well' (说好中国故事). The diplomatic importance of discourse power is clear; it can lead to international recognition, alliances and legitimisation of territorial claims.

There is a history to this. The era of decolonisation saw a widespread post-colonial imperative to overturn the West's 'discourse hegemony'. In 1955, at the famous, first major gathering of Third World leaders at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the agenda included cooperation over news information and media. The aim being to dislodge the monopoly of Western news agencies like the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse. The pre-eminence of these organisations was understood to underpin the discourse power of the western and colonial nations.

Beijing has long considered itself in a contest to control the discourse over Tibet. But in the 1950s, the Communist Party of China's (CPC) knowledge of Tibet was in fact quite limited. This was true to the extent that the PRC's first premier, Zhou Enlai, admitted to his Indian counterpart, Nehru, that Beijing had had no idea what the McMahon Line was, despite this being drawn by the British decades earlier to demarcate British India's border with Tibet.

In this vacuum, many narratives threatening China's discourse about Tibet circulated in areas abutting that ethnic periphery. In northern Indian border towns like Kalimpong and Darjeeling international communities of Tibet enthusiasts produced and circulated ideas naturalising Tibet's separation from China and its close and longstanding religious and cultural ties to India. Some even advanced accounts of a progressive and dynamic history which conflicted with CPC interpretations of Tibet as a feudal, superstitious backwater in need of modernisation.

The PRC's discourse on Tibet was challenged in other ways too. In the 1950s, Delhi's policy was to characterise China's authority over Tibet as 'suzerainty' not 'sovereignty'. The former term is a rather vague feudal concept from European history carrying connotations of significant autonomy and certainly something less than absolute, unquestioned sovereignty. And ever since the 1950s, the dominant discourse in India has been that the PLA 'invaded' and 'occupied' Tibet, contradicting Beijing's narrative about a 'peaceful liberation' in 1951.

Asserting a specific narrative about Tibet at the diplomatic level is a vital support of ethnic governance. There are many parts to Beijing's efforts to control this narrative in recent years. One broad shift that is an important part of the narrative underpinning China's ethnic governance is the very meaning of 'Chinese' and ethnic minority. The PRC was founded with a major emphasis on the distinction between the majority Han Chinese population and the fifty six minority nationalities. Tibet scholar Elliot Sperling has described how, since the disruptions that occurred in Tibet in 2008, a new notion of 'China' and 'Chinese' increasingly dominates official discourse. The Han/non-Han distinction is now downplayed in favour of a notion of China and Chinese as by definition a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural category. This of course helps to bolster the idea of national unity within China. Furthermore, official publications in English no longer use the term 'Tibet' and instead use the Chinese term 'Xizang'. Again, this helps to dilute the distinctive identity which Tibet has enjoyed as a unique part of China.

Another element of this struggle to control the discourse over Tibet and ethnicity within China would be official responses to academic research overseas. The best example would be Beijing's irritation with

the 'New Qing History'. The American historians associated with this school argue that China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing, was essentially non-Han and therefore non-Chinese. Beijing dismisses all this as 'historical nihilism' for obvious reasons. It challenges the official narrative which places all minority ethnic groups like the Tibetans, and also including the Manchu rulers of the Qing, as simply sub-groups within the broad category of Chinese.

At the heart of this struggle over the Tibet narrative today is the increasingly urgent question of the Dalai Lama's succession. Beijing and the Dalai Lama are themselves wrestling over who will have authority over this question, with the Tibetan leader recently stating on his 90th birthday that this will only be decided by his immediate circle; Beijing insists that Chinese central authorities have always had sovereign power over this appointment. Although the Dalai Lama has accepted Chinese sovereignty over Tibet he advocates for cultural and religious autonomy within that framework, but Beijing is unwilling to countenance any such limitation.

And this question of ethnic governance is also a diplomatic issue because neighbouring and Buddhist countries all find themselves having to negotiate with China's narrative on this. While many states officially accept China's perspective, local Buddhist populations are often inclined to favour the other view. One cause of Beijing's sensitivities on this issue is rooted in the 1950s. In that period, the CPC attempted to govern Tibet within a framework of cultural autonomy, but this failed to bring stability either within Tibet or in terms of relations with neighbouring India.

Ultimately, China's ethnic governance is not confined to domestic nation-building—it is a strategic lever in a global contest over narrative authority. The case of Tibet exemplifies how internal governance intersects with international diplomacy, particularly in the realm of discourse power. Beijing's efforts to redefine ethnic identity suppress alternative historical interpretations, and control over the succession of the Dalai Lama are all part of a broader campaign to assert its narrative. This contest is not unilateral. The United States' 2024 Resolve Tibet Act, which allocates funding to counter China's "misinformation," underscores that narrative control over Tibet is now a site of geopolitical struggle. Far from being a marginal issue, ethnic governance has become a frontline in China's challenge to Western discourse hegemony—one that spans media, academia, and diplomacy. Understanding this entanglement is essential to grasping the deeper logic of China's international behaviour.

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PLA AS THE STRATEGIC ENABLER OF THE PARTY'S GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

China has launched four initiatives; the first was the global initiative on data security, second was the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and third is the Global Security Initiative (GSI). This third initiative was announced on April 22 by Mr. Xi Jinping himself at the Boao Forum. There were six commitments issued under the GSI.

The first is the guiding principle. The second is the basic requisite, third is a fundamental requirement, fourth is an important principle which is to stay committed to differences and disputes being solved by discussions and dialogue. The sixth direction talked about upholding indivisible security. Indivisible security is basically borrowed from the Helsinki pact which stipulated the restrictions between NATO and Warsaw and also proposes that the security of any country is inseparable from others in the region. So that is the basic principle of indivisible security. Except the aspect relating to respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, the PLA can play a role. So how is China operationalising these principles, and what is the PLA doing to support China in adhering to the GSI?

The first principle is the common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. An example of common security is the UN peacekeeping missions that China has been carrying out and the China-Africa peace and security partnership which was announced in Forum On China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) 2024. Under comprehensive security, China undertakes humanitarian relief missions and at the Xiangshan Forum, officials talked about cyber security and non-traditional security issues in which the PLA is involved. As part of cooperative security, there is the Mekong river patrol, joint sea exercises and the China-Indonesia maritime cooperation sea drills.

Lastly, under sustainable security, China participates in the antipiracy task forces in the gulf of Aiden. The 48th task force is underway and the 49th is will begin in October 2025. This is the first way in which the PLA can help China attain its GSI objectives.

A closer look at peacekeeping missions shows how China has ramped up its contribution towards peacekeeping, whereas the US has actually reduced its commitment to peacekeeping. Mr. Xi Jinping has committed to keeping 8,000 troops ready for deployment for peacekeeping mission which they have completed at this point in time. The second principle is about peacefully resolving differences, which includes military diplomacy, joint exercises, peacekeeping operations, HADR, security forums and dialogues, naval escort missions and support for regional mediation. There are many more activities that the PLA can actually undertake to help in achieving this principle. One of the things that the GSI talks about is expanding the role of the PLA from the borders, outward, which tells us about the number of areas in which the PLA is likely to have bases in future. We already know about Djibouti, the Ream Naval Base and Gwadar. There are 14 such bases in the world, and others being talked about.

The USA is able to project power and react to any situation around the globe in 6 to 12 hours because they have 800 bases. China has only two at this point in time. So, in future there will be a movement towards more bases by China which will enhance the GSI. There is also a new base located near Tajikistan, on the Afghanistan border, that has come up in 2024. There are also police stations operated by the People's Armed Police (PAP), which is not strictly the PLA, but in 2018 when the PAP was bought into the CMC it has become part of an extended role for the PLA. In addition to this, there is the Blue Seaman, which has come up in a big way and is almost all over the world. Lastly, indivisible security is something we find in relation to Pakistan, basically to ensure that the security of India need not be affected by Pakistan or vice versa. The second aspect of indivisible security is about assisting India's neighborhood to ensure that China has influence in India's periphery. However, the same approach can be extended to other areas in the world and it is how the PLA can help China in advancing its GSI.





24TH SEPTEMBER 2025

ROUNDTABLES I, II, III, IV AND SPECIAL ROUNDTABLE

Day 2 of GCNS 2025 hosted confidential roundtables and the deliberations are not available for public release.

DAY 2

Day 2 of the conference featured a series of high-level, closed-door roundtables that collectively mapped the landscape of China's evolving strategic behaviour across its domestic, regional and global theatres. The discussions, held under the Chatham House Rule, unfolded with an expert-driven analytical depth that underscored the complexity of Beijing's contemporary statecraft and its implications for India, Asia, and the wider international order.

The morning opened with a roundtable on India-China security dynamics, which examined the structural evolution of China's multi-vector challenge. Participants highlighted how Beijing's approach to territorial, maritime, technological and economic competition is shifting towards a model of "multi-domain saturation". The conversation foregrounded the fragility of the LAC's "new normal", the growing salience of the Tibet question—including succession politics and hydrological leverage—and the rapid expansion of China's naval logistics architecture in the Indian Ocean. Attention also centered on the intensifying China-Pakistan nexus and the domestic-regional interface of influence operations, trade dependencies and digital coercion. The session concluded with reflections on under-appreciated blind spots in Indian strategic thinking and the need for anticipatory rather than reactive policy posture.

The second roundtable expanded the analytical lens to China's strategic posture across global flashpoints. Participants assessed the differentiated logic of Beijing's regional behaviour—from crisis manipulation in Northeast Asia and lawfare in the South China Sea to calibrated ambiguity in the Himalayas and asymmetric coordination with Russia. Discussions also traced China's hedging playbook in the Middle East, its emerging coercive and techno-political strategies in the Taiwan Strait and the underlying coherence of its ambitions to shape regional orders while managing regime insecurity. The panel collectively interrogated whether China is moving toward a meta-doctrine of conflict management that adapts flexibly across theatres.

In the afternoon session, discussions turned to minilateralism and China's Indo-Pacific response. The roundtable evaluated the rise of issue-specific coalitions such as the Quad, AUKUS and other trilateral and plurilateral formats, exploring whether they represent transient hedges or emerging institutional architectures. Participants analysed Beijing's strategic unease with these formations, its discursive preference for the "Asia-Pacific" and its attempts to cultivate alternative alignments. The dialogue also examined India's maritime posture, undersea domain awareness, defence-industrial requirements and the broader contest over supply chains, digital governance, and influence in Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The fourth roundtable brought the focus inward to the dynamics of Party power and governance in Xi Jinping's China. Discussions interrogated the anti-corruption system as an instrument of elite discipline, evolving protest management and predictive surveillance architectures, the absence of succession norms and the decline of informal checks and balances. Participants also analysed how propaganda, digital control and strategic regulation of private technology firms have been institutionalised to sustain Party dominance amid domestic economic and social pressures. The session outlined possible future trajectories for China's governance model—ranging from consolidated centralization to elite fatigue and post-Xi instability.

The final special roundtable of the day turned to China's Trans-Himalayan strategy, placing Tibet at the centre of its domestic-geopolitical nexus. Discussions examined subnational governance models, the securitization of ethnic and environmental policy, and the geopolitical implications of China's approach to transboundary rivers and climate politics. The idea of a Beijing-led "Himalayan Quad" was scrutinised as an emerging instrument for shaping regional alignments and leveraging infrastructural asymmetries across the Himalayan arc.

Collectively, Day 2 offered a comprehensive, interdisciplinary reading of China's strategic orientation—linking frontier politics, regional competition, global ordering and domestic governance. The day's closed-door exchanges underscored the need for nuanced, multi-scalar assessments of Beijing's evolving behaviour, especially as India and other actors navigate an increasingly contested strategic environment.

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