GLOBAL CONFERENCE
on NEW SINOLOGY

INTERCONNECTED EQUILIBRIUM



GCNS CONFERENCE REPORT

THEME: ZÌLÌ GĒNGSHĒNG IN AN ERA OF 'GREAT CHANGES UNSEEN'

ORCA'S FOURTH GCNS REPORT BRINGS TOGETHER THE INSIGHTS, DEBATES AND CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS OF MORE THAN FORTY RENOWNED SINOLOGISTS FROM INDIA AND ACROSS THE WORLD, DISTILLED FROM TWO DAYS OF HIGH-LEVEL DELIBERATIONS HELD IN NEW DELHI ON 28-29 SEPTEMBER 2026. IT CAPTURES THE EVOLVING SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES THAT ARE SHAPING OUR CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF CHINA'S DOMESTIC EVOLUTION, REGIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND GLOBAL STRATEGIC POSTURE.



ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON CHINA AND ASIA

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ABOUT **ORCA & GCNS**



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 behaviour. We are one of the few, if not the only, think tanks in India that focus on domestic Chinese policy-making and how it shapes external actions by Beijing. ORCA's website presents 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) is ORCA's annual conference, which assembles the finest global minds in Sinology from diverse academic and professional backgrounds to analyse and understand Chinese actions and their implications. GCNS is India's leading and South Asia's largest dialogue-driven China-focused conference held every September in New Delhi.

The inaugural edition of the GCNS in 2023 was themed *Beijing's Superpower Ambitions in the 'New Era'*. We hosted 55+ national and international experts and 400+ delegates in attendance, across 5 sessions spanning two days, with over 22 panels. By integrating contemporary facets of New Sinology in domestic politics, foreign policy, economy and defence strategy, the inuagural GCNS convened leading Sinologists and experts to critically explore China's rising ambitions and internal dynamics. GCNS convened leading Sinologists and experts to critically explore China's rising ambitions and internal dynamics. The event deliberations were well appreciated by policymakers and members of the academic community, with the conference report having received over 7000+ downloads.

Building on that momentum, GCNS 2024 was centered on *The Art of Power in Zhōngnánhǎi*. The conference deliberations focused on how the Communist Party of China (CPC) cultivates, consolidates, retains and projects power-domestically and internationally via economic, diplomatic, political and military engagements to further China's ambitions in the 'new era'. The event recorded over 1,200 registrants and featured 55+ distinguished speakers, delivering 66 talks across five curated sessions. With 400+ delegates from academia, policy circles and media, GCNS 2024 was a key platform for generating insights into China's evolving power dynamics.



The GCNS 2025 edition advanced dialogue on *China's 'Dream' for a New Mandate of Power*. The conference examined how China is exporting a new vision and model for the international order-through state-led capitalism, development diplomacy, digital standards and controlled multilateralism-all framed under the ideological narrative of the "China Dream". The 2025 edition also marked a significant expansion in the substantive scope of GCNS, bringing increasingly sensitive, contemporary and policy-relevant questions to the center of discussions. ORCA adopted a revised format for more confidential conversations, with the second day of the conference held as a closed-door Roundtable Discussion under Chatham House Rule, bringing together around 40+ China experts and practitioners from around the world with alongside 250+ conference delegates over the two days.

The unique topics ideated by ORCA at previous editions of GCNS have gone on to become avenues of discussion and scholarship by institutions around the world. Collectively, the GCNS conference reports have attracted over 27,000+ downloads, reflecting sustained engagement with the conference. GCNS embodies ORCA's intellectual mission: to craft a new vocabulary of China analysis that is theoretically rigorous, policy-relevant and globally engaged. This fourth edition builds on this goal with Day 1 featuring thematic panels, keynotes and experts' dialogues, while Day 2 will host closed-door roundtables.













REMARKS **FROM DIRECTOR**



Eerishika Pankaj

DIRECTOR, ORCA & CONVENOR, GCNS

Since its inception in 2023, the Global Conference on New Sinology (GCNS), organised by the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), has grown from an idea for a new platform for the study of China into the largest China-focused conference in South Asia, bringing together scholars, policymakers, practitioners and experts from India and around the world.

For ORCA, GCNS is an important part of our broader effort to strengthen the study of contemporary China in India and across Asia. As a research organisation focused on Chinese politics, foreign policy and the wider China-Asia relationship, ORCA seeks to contribute to a deeper, more rigorous and empirically grounded understanding of China. We believe that meaningful analysis and understanding of China requires not only greater expertise, but also sustained dialogue among scholars and practitioners across institutions, disciplines and countries.

Over four editions, GCNS has become a platform for precisely this kind of engagement. It provides space for established scholarship alongside emerging research, encourages conversations that cross disciplinary and geographic boundaries, and creates opportunities for new intellectual and professional networks in the field of China studies. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a stronger and more diverse community of China scholarship in India and South Asia.

GCNS has always sought to move beyond narrow binaries and conventional frames in the study of China. The conference brings together different disciplines, perspectives and generations of scholarship to examine China as a complex political, economic, social and strategic actor. The 2026 edition continues this endeavour by exploring the multiple dimensions of China's transformation—from domestic politics and economic governance to technological development, military modernisation, foreign policy and China's evolving role in the international order.

This year's theme, "Zìlì gēngshēng in an Era of Great Changes Unseen," spoke to one of the defining questions of contemporary China: how does China seek to build greater self-reliance and resilience while navigating a period of profound transformation in the international system? Zìlì gēngshēng—self-reliance and self strengthening—has deep roots in China's political thought, but its contemporary meaning extends across technology, economics, security, governance and foreign policy. As China confronts a rapidly changing global environment, deconstructing how Beijing conceptualises and pursues self-strengthening is essential to understanding both its domestic trajectory and its engagement with the world.

We chose this theme as we believed it captured something fundamental about the way in which China was thinking about itself and the world around it: "Zìlì Gēngshēng in an Era of 'Great Changes Unseen'." Almost a year earlier, I had begun writing about zìlì gēngshēng, not only because it was increasingly becoming part of the Chinese state lexicon, but also because I found the history of the phrase particularly interesting. Its origins could be traced back to Mao-era campaigns of self-reliance and production in the early 1940s. What is important to remember is that zìlì gēngshēng carries the idea of regeneration through one's own effort, which is a somewhat different proposition from simply becoming self-sufficient.

China has never operated in complete isolation from the international system. Its extraordinary economic transformation over the preceding several decades had been deeply connected to global trade, foreign investment, technology and cross-border production networks. Therefore, when Beijing spoke about self-reliance, it was not necessarily announcing a retreat from the world. However, it raised an important question: how did China seek to build the capacity to remain resilient, competitive and strategically autonomous even when its external environment became less predictable?

We hoped that this question would remain at the centre of our discussions over the two days --and it most certainly did, blending into the second part of our theme which remains equally important. China increasingly describes the contemporary international environment as one of "great changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局). Although the phrase predated Xi Jinping, under his leadership it had evolved from analytical terminology into a broader framework through which the Party interpreted China's changing domestic and international environment.

As China waits for the environment to stabilise and seeks to adapt to emerging uncertainties, it is also building the capacity to shape the environment itself. We believe that this third possibility makes zìlì gēngshēng particularly interesting for understanding China at this time.

Hence, at GCNS 2026, we sought to examine what happened when a political system attempted to regenerate its own sources of strength across multiple domains. We asked what this meant for Party politics, China's economy, technological governance, military modernisation and foreign policy. These questions intersected, as was reflected in the architecture of our conference programme.

Our first session examined how China's self-reliance was being integrated and implemented as a national strategy. We moved from Party discourse and social stability to questions of political uncertainty and leadership transition, economic headwinds and China's artificial intelligence strategy.

Our conference premised that if zìlì gēngshēng was indeed becoming a principle of statecraft, we needed to look not only at what Chinese leaders said, but also at how institutions behaved. Hence, on Day 1 we later turned to another question that was particularly relevant as China approached the 21st Party Congress in 2027. Our Experts' Dialogue examined the signals emerging from Zhongnanhai. While leadership succession naturally attracted considerable attention, the deliberations were built on a more useful analytical question: what could personnel, policy and institutional changes tell us about the direction of the Chinese political system itself?

We then moved to another important dimension of the conference theme: the relationship between domestic capacity and external power. Our panel, "Beijing's self-sufficient Architecture for a New Mandate of Power," examined the role of subnational actors, maritime instruments and public-private stakeholders in China's global connectivity ambitions. This reflected one of ORCA's longstanding interests: understanding China's external behaviour by looking carefully at developments within China.

The second half of the day turned to the India-China relationship. For an audience gathered in New Delhi, this was naturally an important conversation. We noted that the trajectory of the relationship had consequences for regional stability, the Asian order and the wider evolution of a multipolar international system. Our programme therefore sought to examine not merely how the two countries managed their differences, but also what the experience of the preceding decade revealed about strategic rivalry, crisis management, selective engagement and the possibilities and limits of coexistence.

We subsequently examined China's foreign-policy machinery through a panel on foreign-policy institutions, actors and decision-making. The discussion addressed the question of who actually shaped Chinese foreign policy and highlighted how the Party-state apparatus, diplomatic institutions, military and security actors, provincial governments and commercial entities increasingly intersected in China's external engagement. I argued that understanding the institutional architecture through which these actors coordinated was as important as examining the formal diplomatic positions adopted by Beijing.

This was also why the keynote address on China's role in global conflict was particularly timely. China increasingly presented itself as a country capable of contributing to crisis management and political settlement. It emphasised that understanding the intersection between China's diplomatic narrative and its underlying strategic interests was essential to assessing the kind of international actor Beijing is becoming.

Finally, we closed the day by examining China's 15th Five-Year Plan. We studied it as an important instrument for understanding how the Chinese leadership was thinking about the country's next phase of development, and how it intended to reconcile economic transformation, technological advancement, social governance, national security and international ambitions through 2030.

GCNS was not a conference in which we began with conclusions and searched for evidence to confirm them. Rather, we sought to create a space where assumptions could be challenged, conventional wisdom questioned and different interpretations of China considered alongside one another. We remain particularly grateful to all our speakers and chairs who had made the journey to New Delhi, and to everyone who had contributed intellectually and institutionally to making GCNS 2026 possible. We also extend sincere appreciation to our partners. our participants and to our larger community of scholars for bringing their expertise, disagreements and questions to GCNS each year.

THEME OF **GCNS 2026**

ZÌLÌ GĒNGSHĒNG IN AN ERA OF 'GREAT CHANGES UNSEEN'

China today stands at the intersection of profound domestic transformation and an increasingly volatile international order. From technological competition and supply chain fragmentation to demographic transitions, economic restructuring and intensifying geopolitical rivalry, Beijing characterises the contemporary international environment as one marked by "great changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局). Although the phrase predates the presidency of Xi Jinping, it is under his leadership that it has become one of the defining frameworks through which the Communist Party of China (CPC) interprets the contemporary international order. Originally articulated by Chinese political scientist Yuan Peng in 2009, the concept was elevated into strategic lexicon by Xi in 2017. It has since been incorporated into the broader architecture of Xi Jinping Thought post the 19th Party Congress, presenting a clear example of analytical assessment transforming into ideological dictum via which Zhōngnánhǎi understands the shifting global balance of power.

It is also within this worldview that zìlì gēngshēng (自力更生) - which translates to "regeneration through one's own effort" or more simply, self-reliance - has acquired renewed strategic significance. Originally articulated during the revolutionary period as a principle of political survival and national reconstruction, zìlì gēngshēng has undergone successive reinterpretations across different phases of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Now embedded within contemporary policy as seen in the 15th Five-Year Plan, the phrase is not confined to revolutionary rhetoric but rather used to push forward frameworks governing scientific innovation, military modernisation, new quality productive forces, social norms and more. The concept increasingly informs Beijing's efforts to navigate external pressures/constraints while concurrently reshaping China's developmental and global positioning within what it defines as an era of great changes unseen in a century.

The Fourth Edition of the Global Conference on New Sinology (GCNS) examined the contemporary meanings, applications and implications of zìlì gēngshēng across China's internal and external behaviours within the broader framework of great changes unseen in a century. Moving beyond conventional interpretations of zìlì gēngshēng as 'self-reliance' that translates into economic or political autarky, the conference explored how the concept in its true form - regeneration through one's own effort - is reshaping elite politics, Party ideology, state-market relations, technological governance, military strategy, regional diplomacy and China's engagement with the Global South in an age of systemic transformations.

In 2026, GCNS aimed to deepen the understanding of how China is adapting to an era it defines as one of great changes unseen in a century, and how zìlì gēngshēng is shaping its vision for navigating the uncertainties of the decade.



27TH SEPTEMBER 2026

CURTAIN-RAISER EVENT

The curtain raiser event included a Fireside Chat, followed by a Welcome Dinner for speakers and select invitees.

DAY 0



FIRESIDE CHAT

MS. APARNA RAY,
Joint Secretary, Centre for Contemporary China Studies (CCCS), New Delhi

in conversation with

MS. EERISHIKA PANKAJ,
Director, Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), New Delhi

ORCA hosted a closed-door curtain-raiser event ahead of its main conference, bringing together scholars and experts to examine the changing dynamics of India-China relations. The event provided a broader context for the main conference by focusing on India's understanding of and engagement with China, thereby reinforcing India's role as an emerging hub of New Sinology.

The discussion opened with examining the evolution of India-China relations, tracing their roots in a shared civilisational history and exploring how contemporary ties are increasingly shaped by geopolitical realities, security concerns, economic interdependence and evolving global priorities. Both countries face shared developmental challenges and possess expanding capabilities, creating potential avenues for cooperation even when their strategic interests may diverge. The conversation also situated bilateral relations within broader shifts in the international order, including India's evolving global role and China's growing influence in the Global South.

Building on this broader geopolitical context, the discussion explored the role of strategic autonomy in enabling countries to pursue partnerships based on their respective interests rather than rigid geopolitical alignments. India's engagement across different regional and international groupings need not preclude cooperation with China in areas of converging interests, including healthcare, demographic challenges, poverty alleviation, artificial intelligence, emerging technologies, space and mining. Realising this potential, however, requires sustained dialogue and a deeper understanding of each other's strategic priorities.

This need for greater mutual understanding also brings attention to the importance of strengthening China studies in India. The discussion highlighted that developing a stronger research ecosystem is essential not only for academic advancement but also for informed policymaking. Closer collaboration between think tanks, universities and government institutions, supported by data-sharing, language training and academic exchanges, could help bridge existing gaps between research and policy. At the same time, peace and tranquillity along the border remain essential to maintaining stable bilateral relations and enabling progress in other areas.

Economic interdependence adds another dimension to the India-China relationship, with trade imbalance, supply chain complexities and potential for economic leverage requiring an assessment beyond headline figures. The discussion also touched upon China's growing maritime and aerospace capabilities, highlighting the need to extend strategic assessments beyond traditional land-based concerns. This aspect of the exchange was well received by the audience, reflecting the growing strategic significance of these domains.

Ultimately, the exchange also examined China's initiatives such as Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), highlighting the need for a closer understanding of their objectives and implications. These discussions underscored the importance of managing differences while identifying areas of mutual interest. For India, this entails strengthening its own capabilities without equating "Atmanirbharta" or self-reliance with isolation, while continuing to pursue economic engagement and international cooperation.



28TH SEPTEMBER 2026

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 2026 | Zìlì Gēngshēng in an Era of 'Great Changes Unseen'*.

DAY 1

Zìlì Gēngshēng in an Era of 'Great Changes Unseen'

OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY PROF. KERRY BROWN
PROFESSOR, CHINESE STUDIES AND DIRECTOR, LAU CHINA INSTITUTE, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON, UK

The theme of the conference this year revolves around two phrases, neither of them of recent provenance, but used a great deal since 2015 by Xi Jinping and his colleagues in the political elite of the Communist Party of China. The first is the repeated reference that Xi has made to 'changes not seen in a hundred years'. He said this, for instance, when meeting with Vladimir Putin of Russia in 2023. It occurs also in many of his speeches. The other is the Chinese phrase 'Zili Gengsheng' (自力更生), words which were used from 1945 in Mao Zedong's speeches and statements, and which was most heavily deployed during the split with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. Their invitation for China to be 'self-reliant', however, has added resonance today, in a time when intensifying strategic competition with the US has made it develop strategies, in technology and other areas, of greater reliance on itself rather than the outside world. The spirit of Zili Gensheng is therefore very much back, despite the profound changes in the world in the period in between.

Historic narratives are important to the Chinese leadership today. This is not just because they give a shape and meaning to the recent past, and the extraordinary changes that have happened over this time. They also give added legitimacy and power to the policies which are being used today to shape the future. The China story is one that Chinese leaders have been telling, almost exhaustively, over the last few years, as they claim their moment of modern renaissance and resurrection after the history of colonial oppression and humiliation which they believed they unfairly suffered for much of the century after 1840 and the first Anglo-Chinese War.

One of the great challenges for the telling of this story is how to reconcile the most recent portions of it – the 1949-1976 period of Mao Zedong, and then the Reform and Opening up era afterwards. In many ways, a phrase like 'Zili Gengsheng' illustrates this well. When it was first deployed, China was a poor, developing country, with a life expectancy of 32 years in 1949 when the People's Republic was established. In 1966, the Chinese economy was only 3.66 per cent of the global whole. The same year, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, the country only had one ambassador abroad, in Egypt, as all its other main representatives had been recalled back to Beijing to undergo class struggle and thought reform. In almost every respect, China in the period of Mao and that of today are different. China is now 19 per cent of global GDP. It has 274 diplomatic posts in 176 countries, making this the most extensive in the world. The US, in comparison, only has 270 in 170 countries. To be self-reliant in the Maoist period carried a very different meaning that to be self-reliant today – as too, did the overall narrative that China now has of not just aspiring to be a major global power, as it certainly did under Mao, but being in a very strong position to achieve this aim.

What is the same between the Maoist era and today, however, are the deep uncertainties and fractures that afflict geopolitics. In the 1960s and 1970s a sense of profound uneasiness and insecurity caused not just the Red Guard protests in China, but also the cultural wars in the US, and the demonstrations in France and across Europe.



The US and the USSR were at loggerheads with each other, with growing strategic rivalry. The Vietnamese war was sapping the US's political energies and resources. We can see parallels with today. Divisions are rife across Western societies, with the US more visibly divided and fractious than for many decades. Political polarisation is also a common feature of Europe, with older established parties on the left and right seemingly unable to appeal to large parts of their public that are keener on more radical solutions. The US/USSR fight has been replaced by the US and China. The Vietnam war is now duplicated in what looks like an endless morass in Iran, after the US's attack in early 2026, with no easy exit. We seem to be in a new era of contention and strife.

What is new is the emergence of global, existential issues which, despite the rise of nationalism and populism across the planet, necessarily demand multilateral responses and which will not be solved simply by local, unilateral action. These include climate change, with 2026 once more posting the highest temperatures seen in modern times; Artificial Intelligence, with even leaders of AI companies expressing concern about their ability to control the extraordinary new technologies now being created; and technology, with China, India, the US and others striving to create new robotic, life science and other forms of innovation, at a scale and speed never seen before. Perhaps this is the main thing that Xi refers to when he speaks about 'changes not seen in a hundred years' – an era as paradigm breaking as the first industrial revolution over a century ago.

Today, `Zili Gengsheng' has been expressed in policies in China like the dual circulation idea of 2021, which seeks to balance domestic economic growth with international engagement. This approach reflects China's need to sustain external collaboration while building resilience against a global environment it increasingly perceives as hostile and distrustful of its rise. But new phenomena include the rise of a sense of Chinese cultural confidence, a strong narrative of Chinese destiny, and a deeper awareness that China today, as never before, is a global power, who lies at the centre of all attempts to answer the major existential issues above, but which will increasingly have to play a role in issues in the Middle East, Central Asia, and elsewhere in the world as the reach of the US and its allies weakens.



SESSION 1:
HOW IS CHINA'S SELF RELIANCE INTEGRATED AND IMPLEMENTED AS A NATIONAL STRATEGY?



GREAT CHANGES, STRATEGIC RESPONSES: CHINA'S REGENERATION PLAYBOOK

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

As China navigates what the Communist Party describes as an era of "great changes unseen in a century," it is increasingly developing new tools through which it interprets and responds to strategic uncertainty. This panel examines the centrality of zili gengsheng in China's contemporary statecraft by exploring how Party discourse, governance practices, foreign policy, economic management and artificial intelligence innovation are being remobilized to strengthen national resilience. Together, the discussions will highlight the comprehensive adaptation of domestic and external strategies to manage a contested international environment, offering insights into the ideas shaping China's regeneration efforts.

MR. KALPIT A. MANKIKAR - *MODERATOR*
(China Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi)

China considers the whole notion of "Great Changes Unseen in a Century", particularly from the speeches that are coming out of the Chinese leadership, and looks at an international environment which is marked by a sense of turbulence and transformation. The question of how China is responding to this diagnosis of uncertainty is a meaningful one and demands urgent analysis. The Chinese notion of self reliance is reaching across economic, technological and strategic domains but this is not the self reliance that is synonymous with autarky. China is also looking at strengthening its capabilities and how these internal capabilities should coexist with a greater sense of international economic engagement and even greater sense of respect for international norms.

Self reliance is also about reducing vulnerabilities in critical technologies and innovations. This is where the whole arena of Artificial Intelligence (AI) comes into prominence, where China is talking about indigenous technological capability, and also the issue of security governance and sovereignty. The whole notion of turbulence that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) needs to assuage is by creating narratives of confidence and unity to manage the economic and socio-political changes that are happening. The key question is what China seeks to strengthen and make resilient as it prepares for an era of unprecedented change. Is the focus on safeguarding the Party, strengthening the economy, securing technological autonomy, reinforcing the state, or building resilience across all these domains simultaneously?

There are four important approaches to understand this situation which differ from each other, yet are interconnected. They facilitate four vantage points and can be categorised under the themes such as narrating social stability through party discourse, unpacking political uncertainty and the risks of leadership transition in China, China's self-reliance amidst economic headwinds and China's AI dominance strategy between competition and sovereignty. China has adopted a comprehensive strategy of adaptation in both domestic as well as external environments. The answers to these domestic-level questions have the potential to clarify current as well as future strategic responses of China in an era of great changes. These four vantage points clarify to a great length and offer insights into the ideas shaping China's regeneration efforts in an essentially contested international environment. Mixing industrial, academic and policy relevant analysis in a holistic way unlocks and unravels the increasingly new vocabulary and strategic tools through which Beijing interprets and responds to this strategic uncertainty and turbulent waters.

DR. RITU AGARWAL
(Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

NARRATING SOCIAL STABILITY THROUGH PARTY DISCOURSE

The Communist Party of China (CPC) seems to be renewing its push for social stability and has created a high-level 'Leading Group for Social Governance within the party's Central Committee'. Even during the 20th Party Congress, Xi Jinping stressed the need for social stability, and considered it to be a pre-requisite for building a strong and prosperous China. Later in 2023, Beijing announced another institutional body, the Central Social Work Department, to consolidate control over all non-public sectors and grassroots organs. During a high-level social governance conference held in Beijing last November, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised that social governance is "crucial to the party's long-term governance and stability". The new White Paper on "National Security in the New Era," released in May 2025, acknowledges that China's society is undergoing profound changes. Increased mobility and pluralisation have led to wider social dispersion and fragmentation, and more political intervention is needed to build a modern, well-ordered society. Moreover, a new law on ethnic unity aims to build "a strong sense of national identity, thus reiterating that patriotism and political loyalty are important to create a cohesive community.

According to recent reports, public discontent in China is rising, and protests are becoming increasingly frequent. These protests increasingly assert individual rights rather than simply demanding government intervention in specific cases. These protests sometimes demand housing compensation from real estate management companies, ask for the removal of accumulated garbage, and call for the demolition of chemical plants that threaten citizens' health. The number of protests has increased 20-fold in 30 years, with land expropriation and demolition conflicts being the most frequent. To address these issues, the Chinese government has introduced a new social governance model based on common prosperity and social harmony.

Social governance differs from social management. Social management mainly refers to the government's regulation and management of social affairs and organisations, while social governance is more connected to the goal of Common Prosperity. The idea of social governance gained wider acceptance in 2013 during a Conference in Fengqiao, Zhejiang province. At the 100th anniversary of the CPC's founding, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised that realising common prosperity is more than an economic goal. Subsequently, in August 2021, he highlighted the need to identify a balanced, coordinated, and inclusive development path, expand the middle-income group, ensure equal access to basic public services, intensify regulation of excessive income, and promote common prosperity in rural areas. In 2022, the Government work report to the NPC Premier Li Keqiang emphasized that social governance is based on collaboration, participation and common gains and to make social governance more effective, the government has to address supply shortages in education, medical care, child care, elderly care, and housing.

During the 2025 National People's Congress, Xi stressed the need to strengthen "society work" (社会工作一定要加强) as a key responsibility of local officials. He noted that the success of social work is key to the Party's long-term governance, the nation's enduring stability, social harmony, and the people's well-being. At the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, he explicitly stated that concepts like Community of Social Governance and Common Prosperity should be incorporated into social work, mainly based on traditional Chinese cultural values such as "benevolence," "harmony," "universal love",

and “order”.

Harmony is the key principle of community governance based on the "six principles" (adhering to Party-building leadership, demand orientation, mass participation, social collaboration, cultural cohesion, and public accountability). The main focus has been building new platforms for discussion among local residents, where villagers can engage with local cadres. He also stressed the need to promote "five harmonies" governance—harmony among neighbours, harmonious rural customs, peaceful dispute resolution, orderly governance, and prosperous livelihoods—and, by establishing grassroots consultation platforms, cultivate a new atmosphere of civility and courtesy.

Mass organisations like the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and Youth League have also been asked to refrain from using the new term "women’s rights," which may hinder efforts to build a harmonious and happy family. Although the CPC has been mobilising Party cadres to strengthen a more cohesive cultural identity, the closure and merger of schools, especially in remote mountainous regions in Nujiang and Deqing in Yunnan, added new tension between ethnic minorities' cultural identity and the intensive development of educational modernisation. Moreover, children who speak their own ethnic language often cannot understand Chinese classes conducted mainly in Mandarin, which most often narrates a cohesive national identity. These are new challenges for the CPC in building cultural infrastructure and fostering a cohesive national identity, especially among young people across China.

PROF. SHIN KAWASHIMA
(Professor of International Relations, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan)

UNPACKING POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND RISKS OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITION IN CHINA

The question of leadership transition in China is marked by significant uncertainty, although there are no immediate signs of a serious succession crisis within the Communist Party of China (CPC). China is currently facing some serious challenges, including border issues, economic pressures, provincial budget issues and problems in the real estate sector. However, barring unforeseen factors such as the health of senior leaders, the leadership transition itself does not appear to pose a major short-term risk. The more serious challenges are likely to emerge over the medium to long term. The next five years will therefore be crucial for the Xi Jinping administration to manage these risks and ensure a stable political transition.

The CPC’s political calendar highlights the importance of the period ahead. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping identified 2035 as a milestone for achieving socialist modernisation and completing the national security system, and 2049 as the target for building a modernised socialist power and realising the Chinese Dream. Against this long-term trajectory, China is also entering a new phase of elite personnel changes. Xi Jinping is highly likely to secure another term as general secretary in 2027. At the same time, however, the leadership appears to have entered a phase in which potential members of the next generation of leaders are being identified and positioned across the Party and State apparatus.

Several political figures, particularly those born in the 1970s, could enter the Politburo and potentially the Politburo Standing Committee. Given their age and the expected timing of the subsequent leadership transition, two of these figures could eventually emerge as potential successors. However, the identities of future leaders remain highly uncertain, and numerous rumours circulate within China regarding possible candidates. At present, the uncertainty regarding the leadership transition is likely to generate greater political sensitivity as the CPC enters a period of significant personnel change. Rather than encouraging bold or risky policy initiatives, the leadership may consequently prioritise cautious governance and policies designed to minimise the possibility of political failure.

Another short term calendar which needs to be kept in mind is the Taiwan and USA elections. This makes it more complex. From late 2027 through 2028, several major political events will occur in close succession. These include the November 2027 US midterm elections, Taiwan’s presidential election in January 2028, the PRC leadership reshuffle in March 2028, the inauguration of Taiwan’s next president in May 2028, and the US presidential election in November 2028. Hence, from a Northeast Asian perspective, 2028 could become a particularly sensitive year, with developments in domestic Chinese politics intersecting with political transitions in Taiwan and the United States.

Amidst this, the composition of the next Politburo Standing Committee remains another major uncertainty. Ding Xuexiang is likely to remain in a senior leadership position given his age, while recent developments suggest that Xi Jinping places considerable confidence in Cai Qi, who has accompanied Xi to high-level US-China summit meetings. The larger question, however, is how political authority will eventually be transferred to a younger generation of leaders born in the 1970s. Xi is unlikely to designate a successor prematurely, partly because doing so could weaken his authority and potentially turn him into a lame duck. The central challenge will be whether the transition can be managed smoothly during the 2030s.

The situation within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) adds another layer of uncertainty to the succession question. The recent downfall of senior military figures, including Zhang Youxia, illustrates the political and personnel challenges within the PLA. Zhang, who will turn 77 in 2027, was originally expected to retire around this period. However, a struggle over his succession reportedly emerged, with potential successors subsequently becoming involved in corruption investigations and other disciplinary cases. Zhang himself was eventually removed amid allegations involving not only corruption but also political issues. His removal, nearly two years earlier than had been anticipated, has effectively left Xi Jinping with much greater control over the Central Military Commission (CMC).

While the implications of these changes for the PLA's theatre commands and other military units remain unclear, there do not appear to be significant problems with the PLA's routine conduct or day-to-day operations. Some observers, however, have questioned whether the ongoing personnel instability could affect the PLA's ability to conduct large-scale military operations. Further personnel changes within the CMC are therefore expected in the run-up to the autumn of 2027.

Overall, the leadership and military personnel changes illustrate the difficulties involved in managing succession within a long-established one-party regime. The key question for the CPC over the next five to ten years will be how to manage the transition of political and military personnel while maintaining elite cohesion, institutional stability and policy continuity. This could prove to be one of the most serious long-term challenges confronting the CPC leadership.

MR. SANTOSH PAI
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SUSTAINING SELF-RELIANCE AMIDST ECONOMIC HEADWINDS

China's economic headwinds are evident domestically in uneven industrial capacity utilisation and a deflationary spiral, both of which reflect the phenomenon of "involution". And the consequent weak profitability and insolvencies at the firm level. From an external perspective, China's trade surplus of US$ 1.18 trillion is also drawing political ire from other countries.

If there is a single post-pandemic policy decision to which the acceleration of such imbalances can be traced back, it is the replacement of GDP growth by self-reliance and upgradation of technology as the paramount national imperative. Evidence of such direction can be corroborated from directional data, policy intent and legal intervention. A screenshot of economic indicators, year on year for the month of August 2026, indicate a relatively strong growth in industrial production (+5.2%), vastly slower growth in retail sales (+0.4%), and negative growth in fixed investment (−7.2%) which translates into strong production despite weak demand, with household consumption contributing less than 40% of the GDP.

The proliferation of high technology is best characterized by the fact that 54.2% of non-financial A-share listed companies (2,922 of 5,391) were classified as "new growth drivers" at the end of 2025. These were based primarily on National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) high-tech manufacturing/high-tech services classifications plus strategic emerging industries that include semiconductors, aerospace, biotech, EVs, AI, information services and related sectors. The transformation is even stronger among new listings. Of the 1,444 companies listing A-shares between 2021 and 2025, 1,305 or 90.4% were classified as technology companies. The geographical concentration of such industries is also striking. In 2024, 320 of the top 500 listed companies ranked by innovation were based in Guangdong (73), Zhejiang (69), Jiangsu (68), Shanghai (57) and Beijing (53). Together that's 320 of the top 500, or 64%, in just these five provincial-level jurisdictions. Simultaneously, debt level among State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) is at an all-time high with SOE debt / GDP ratio touching 193.1% in 2025 from 144.3% in 2019 as per the IMF.

In other words, companies which are fashioning themselves as high technology companies are being allowed to raise capital from the capital markets while SOEs are getting their loans extended. Both are a result of state intervention and that leaves a third category of firms which cannot access capital through state intervention. What is happening to such firms facing the dual burdens of over-capacity and falling prices? What is happening to their employees who lose jobs when such firms fail?

In 2025, the trend of firms becoming insolvent due to overcapacity became much clearer. As per statistics released by the Supreme People's Court, insolvency cases registered an annual increase of 18% to 36,919. An interesting trend comes to light when regional concentration is taken into account. Jiangsu accepted about 11,700 cases (+46%), Zhejiang 6,549 (+19%) and Guangdong 4,621 (+113%). Together they represented 61.94% of China's bankruptcy cases. This means the trends of insolvency and technology upgradation are overlapping in the same industrialised regions. With youth unemployment in the region of 20% there is no guarantee that this transition will be frictionless. However, for the moment it is clear that China's industrial belt is undergoing a delicate Darwinian process. One where firms are either raising capital or going insolvent - both common features of capitalist economies, albeit with requisite Chinese characteristics.

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CHINA'S AI DOMINANCE STRATEGY BETWEEN COMPETITION AND SOVEREIGNTY

China's rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have coincided with a stronger emphasis on technological self-reliance, often understood as reducing dependence on foreign technology. Yet China's experience suggests a more complex relationship between self-reliance and global technological interdependence.

This relationship can be described as an "openness paradox". Efforts to reduce dependence on critical foreign technologies can increase the importance of open and internationally distributed knowledge in building domestic technological capabilities. In other words, reducing technological dependence does not necessarily mean reducing knowledge interdependence. China's emerging AI ecosystem illustrates this dynamic. China has sought to strengthen its domestic capabilities across different stages of AI development, including large language models, cloud infrastructure, and AI chips. At the same time, these capabilities remain connected to global flows of talent and knowledge.

The role of international knowledge exchange is also evident in the experience of researchers working at major Chinese AI laboratories. Research examining DeepSeek publications, as discussed in the Stanford AI Report, highlights the overseas training, education, and professional experience of a considerable proportion of the authors, including experience in US laboratories and companies. Continued publication also allows researchers to share their findings, receive feedback, and engage with the international scientific community. These examples illustrate how international research experience and scientific engagement can contribute to China's AI development alongside domestic capacity-building.

Open science provides another perspective on the relationship between technological self-reliance and international knowledge exchange. Research published in Science examines Chinese companies placed on the US Entity List, including Huawei and Hikvision, whose scientists continued publishing research papers and applying for patents, particularly in AI-related areas. Restrictions on access to certain technological components do not necessarily prevent continued engagement with international scientific research. Scientific publications provide opportunities to receive comments, suggestions, and feedback from international peers. This highlights how efforts to strengthen domestic technological capabilities can coexist with continued participation in international scientific networks. The resulting trajectory is not necessarily a shift from interdependence to independence. Instead, the pursuit of self-reliance may reduce technological dependence without reducing knowledge interdependence.

China's efforts to strengthen domestic technological capabilities must be understood alongside continued engagement with the international scientific community. Self-reliance in AI can be understood from two interconnected perspectives. The first concerns control over the technological supply chain, including software, hardware, and digital infrastructure. From this perspective, technological autonomy requires domestic capabilities across different stages of AI development, ranging from large language models and cloud services to data centres, graphics processing units (GP-

Us) chip design, and semiconductor manufacturing. China's efforts to strengthen its indigenous technological capabilities reflect this approach, particularly in areas considered strategically important to its technological development.

The second perspective concerns the role of knowledge in technological innovation. AI development depends not only on producing technological components but also on combining existing technologies, learning from previous research, and developing new applications. Scientific progress builds on published research, patents, and the accumulated expertise of researchers and engineers. Technological self-reliance therefore also depends on the ability to access, understand and apply knowledge.

China's pursuit of indigenous AI development is shaped by both domestic capacity-building and external constraints. Internally, the country has strengthened its scientific and technological capabilities through a growing pool of trained engineers, the return of scientists with overseas experience, and policies supporting domestic AI companies. Externally, restrictions on access to critical technologies, particularly high-end GPUs and other advanced components, have reinforced the importance of developing domestic alternatives. These constraints have encouraged China to reduce vulnerabilities in its technological supply chains and strengthen its capacity to produce essential technologies. The push for self-reliance is thus shaped by both domestic ambitions and geopolitical pressures.

At the same time, China's AI development demonstrates that domestic technological capacity can grow alongside international knowledge exchange. Chinese AI laboratories have released open-source and open-weight models, enabling users, including startups in other countries, to access and use them. Feedback from a wider community can help developers identify limitations, improve model performance, and refine their technologies. The circulation of AI models can therefore support knowledge sharing and contribute to the wider development of the AI ecosystem.

International engagement also remains important for innovation at the technological frontier. Researchers and AI laboratories draw on scientific findings from other countries, collaborate with international peers, and combine existing knowledge to develop new applications. Publishing research and participating in scientific discussions provide opportunities to exchange ideas, receive feedback, and improve existing models. These interactions demonstrate that innovation is shaped by the circulation of knowledge across national boundaries.

An important distinction therefore emerges between reducing dependence on external technological supply chains and reducing reliance on international knowledge networks. While control over critical infrastructure is essential for strengthening technological autonomy, scientific advancement also benefits from diverse ideas, research, and expertise. China's experience suggests that self-reliance does not require technological isolation. Instead, it involves building domestic capabilities while maintaining the ability to learn from and contribute to the international scientific community.

China’s experience in AI development highlights the importance of understanding technological self-reliance alongside international knowledge interdependence. While strengthening domestic capabilities across hardware, software, and digital infrastructure remains important, advancing innovation also requires engagement with the international scientific community. Chinese AI laboratories continue to benefit from overseas research experience, collaboration with international scientists, and feedback generated through the use of open-source and open-weight models. These interactions allow existing knowledge to be combined, tested, and improved upon. Both self-reliance and international collaboration contribute to AI development in different but interconnected ways. Domestic capacity-building strengthens the ability to develop and control essential technologies, while international knowledge exchange supports continued learning and innovation.





EXPERTS' DIALOGUE 1

SIGNALS BEFORE SUCCESSION: ZHŌNGNÁNHǍI'S ROAD TO THE 21ST PARTY CONGRESS

CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE BY ORCA

As China approaches the 21st Party Congress in 2027, the question of who may eventually succeed Xi Jinping has emerged as one of the most consequential issues in contemporary Chinese politics. Xi's unprecedented concentration of power and the erosion of institutionalized succession norms have made leadership forecasting more complex than at any point in the reform era. While elite personnel reshuffles will inevitably attract significant attention from China watchers, the 21st Party Congress will also provide critical insights into the Communist Party of China's (CPC) broader political direction. This Experts' Dialogue will examine these political and policy signals to assess how the CPC is navigating questions of leadership continuity, institutional adaptation and long-term governance under Xi Jinping.

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China's personnel politics under President Xi Jinping reflects the importance of balancing political reliability and professional competence. As China pursues technological upgrading, industrial transformation, military modernisation and a greater international role, the selection of officials capable of advancing these strategic objectives has become increasingly important. Political reliability, administrative capacity and professional expertise constitute key dimensions of personnel selection.

Political reliability encompasses organisational discipline, policy alignment and a shared understanding of national strategic priorities. Professional competence, meanwhile, requires specialised knowledge, administrative experience and the ability to coordinate complex organisations. The central challenge of personnel selection is to identify officials who combine these qualities and effectively translate national strategies into policy outcomes.

This framework provides a useful perspective for examining several recruitment networks associated with President Xi Jinping's leadership, including officials with career experience in Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanghai and Shaanxi, as well as those with backgrounds in established political families and technical organisations, particularly aerospace institutions. These categories overlap and should not be treated as distinct political groups. Nevertheless, they offer different combinations of professional expertise, administrative experience and established working relationships.

Aerospace technocrats are particularly noteworthy because many have developed their careers in state-owned enterprises, research institutes and defence-related industries. They bring specialised knowledge

and experience in managing large organisations in strategically important sectors. Officials with experience in Shaanxi offer established working relationships and regional administrative experience, while Shanghai, Fujian and Zhejiang provide substantial administrative talent and experience in managing dynamic regional economies. These diverse career backgrounds contribute different capabilities to China's leadership.

The rise of technocrats, however, raises an important question about the relationship between technical expertise and political leadership. Earlier generations of Chinese technocrats often entered the Party-state relatively early and accumulated extensive political and administrative experience. Some contemporary aerospace officials have spent considerably longer in specialised organisations before transitioning into territorial leadership. Provincial leadership requires local knowledge, bureaucratic coordination and comprehensive administrative capabilities. Technical expertise is valuable, but it cannot automatically substitute for these broader governance skills.

The future advancement of technocrats may therefore depend on their ability to translate specialised knowledge and organisational experience into effective political and administrative leadership. A more gradual pace of technocratic advancement would not necessarily indicate a declining emphasis on technical expertise. Rather, it could reflect the increasing importance of combining technical specialisation with comprehensive governance experience.

Generational renewal represents another important dimension of personnel selection. As China's development priorities evolve, the cultivation of younger officials with appropriate professional expertise and administrative capabilities becomes increasingly important. Compared with established senior officials, younger candidates require more opportunities to demonstrate their leadership capabilities across different institutional and regional settings.

Maintaining continuity among experienced senior officials can provide advantages in terms of policy implementation, institutional knowledge and organisational stability. A gradual approach to generational renewal may help balance these considerations with the need to cultivate younger leaders. Developing a sufficiently broad pool of experienced younger officials will remain an important task for China's long-term leadership development.

Military leadership may follow a somewhat different trajectory. The modernisation of the People's Liberation Army places considerable emphasis on organisational reform, technological capabilities, professional standards and operational effectiveness. Younger officers whose careers have developed alongside the military reforms initiated under President Xi Jinping may possess experience and expertise particularly suited to these emerging requirements. Civilian and military leadership renewal may therefore proceed at different rates, reflecting their respective institutional and strategic priorities.

Looking ahead to the 21st Party Congress, the balance between leadership continuity and personnel renewal will be an important aspect of China's political development. Across civilian and military institutions, the selection of officials who combine political reliability, professional competence and comprehensive leadership experience will have significant implications for China's governing capacity and the advancement of its long-term strategic objectives.

MS. YONG HONG HAN
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Chinese leadership transition and succession planning are highly sensitive subjects. China's political system is often described as opaque, but this does not mean that its political processes are entirely unpredictable. The Communist Party of China (CPC) follows established procedures for preparing for Party Congresses and leadership transitions, and these procedures provide important indicators of how the next leadership reshuffle is being organised.

Succession planning for the 21st Party Congress is already underway. Official accounts of the preparations for previous Party Congresses show that the process begins well before the congress itself. For the 20th Party Congress, the Politburo Standing Committee and Politburo approved a document in June 2021 titled Opinions on Carefully Doing a Good Job in Personnel Preparation for the 20th Central Committee and Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. This was followed by a

process of cadre recommendations, inspections, consultations and vetting across provincial-level governments, central Party and state organs, major financial institutions, state-owned enterprises and military units.

A similar process should already be underway for the 21st Party Congress in 2027. The selection and vetting of potential Central Committee members should be understood as an ongoing institutional process rather than something that begins only shortly before the Party Congress. For officials who are potential candidates for the next Central Committee, this is likely to be a politically consequential period, as their political performance, loyalty, integrity and professional records come under greater scrutiny. The more politically consequential question concerns succession to Xi Jinping himself. The baseline expectation among observers of Chinese elite politics is that Xi will remain General Secretary for another term and enter a fourth term after the 21st Party Congress.

However, a clearly identifiable successor would signal that a transfer of power is being prepared for the 22nd Party Congress in 2032. It could also constrain Xi Jinping's options for remaining in office beyond a fourth term. More importantly, once a successor is identified, political networks and constituencies associated with that individual could begin to consolidate. In a political system where elite loyalty is expected to remain centred on the incumbent leadership, the emergence of an identifiable successor could therefore create political risks for Xi. It is consequently more plausible that the 21st Party Congress will elevate several younger leadership figures who could eventually compete for succession rather than designate one clear successor.

Similarly, a fifth term for Xi should also not be ruled out. The continuing consolidation of Xi's authority, the removal of senior Party officials and the ongoing purge of senior military personnel indicate that he continues to exercise substantial control over the political system. Some observers interpret these purges as evidence of elite disloyalty or as an indication of the limitations of the anti-corruption campaign.

However, the absence of visible political instability within the Party or among the broader population suggests that these developments have not significantly weakened Xi's position. If anything, they indicate the continuing strength of his control over the system. Xi's pursuit of a fourth term is therefore unlikely to face serious intra-Party resistance, while the possibility of his remaining in office beyond it should remain open.

Thus, the most important indicator at the 21st Party Congress may not be the emergence of a single successor, but the advancement of an entire cohort of younger officials. Current projections suggest that more than two-thirds of the existing Central Committee could be replaced by the 21st Party Congress because of age-related turnover, disciplinary action, promotions and other forms of personnel circulation. One recent analysis estimates that the 21st Central Committee turnover could exceed two-thirds, potentially making the 2027 reshuffle one of the largest leadership renewals in the post-Deng period.

The generational composition of the new Central Committee will be particularly important. Officials born in the 1970s are expected to account for a substantially larger share of the next Central Committee than they did in 2022. Current assessments similarly point to the growing prominence of the Party's so-called "seventh generation", broadly comprising officials born in the late 1960s and 1970s.

This cohort is politically significant because its formative experiences differ from those of previous generations. Many were born after the Cultural Revolution and have benefited from greater access to higher education and international exposure. Guo Ningning, for example, held senior positions in the financial sector in Singapore before moving into senior positions in China. These experiences could contribute to different approaches to economic management, technology, foreign affairs and China's engagement with the international system.

However, generational differences should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of political liberalisation or a departure from the existing Party system. Their advancement could gradually reshape the composition of the Party leadership without necessarily altering the fundamental political structure of the CPC.

The 21st Party Congress should be analysed less through the narrow question of "Who will succeed Xi?" and more through the broader process of how the next generation of Party elites is being selected, promoted and positioned. Xi's continued dominance appears relatively secure in the immediate term,

while the more consequential uncertainty concerns how he will manage the emergence of a younger leadership cohort and whether and when he will eventually identify a successor. The composition, backgrounds and career trajectories of the post-1970s generation will consequently be among the most important indicators for understanding China's political trajectory after the 21st Party Congress in 2027.











PANEL DISCUSSION 2

BEIJING'S SELF-SUFFICIENT ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW MANDATE OF POWER

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

China's growing international influence is increasingly underpinned by institutions, doctrines and domestic actors that extend beyond the traditional instruments of diplomacy. As Beijing adapts to an uncertain external environment, it has invested in building an internal architecture capable of supporting its long-term strategic interests abroad. This panel examines how maritime posturing, subnational actors, public and private entities are expanding China's capacity to shape its external environment, offering new perspectives on the relationship between domestic governance and international influence.

DR. RAJIV RANJAN - *MODERATOR*
(Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi)

Xi Jinping, General Secretary of CCP, and President of China now rides in his official state vehicle- the Hongqi N701, seen during his international visits, such as the BRICS summit in Delhi and visits to Washington, a practice originating during his 2014 tour of New Zealand. It can be framed as an allegory for how Beijing is signaling confidence and promoting an image of self-reliance. The same goes with China's conviction regarding the strength and efficacy of its domestic institutions. China's global projection is not solely driven by international trade; it is equally defined by deliberate institutional design. Internal institutions, ranging from state-owned commercial banks to developmental agencies that have been systematically calibrated to extend Beijing's influence globally. Rather than operating by coincidence, these entities are explicitly structured to serve as instruments of external statecraft. Examples such as the foreign branches of major state institutions, including ICBC in London and Mumbai, demonstrate how domestic capability is repurposed for international reach.

While Chinese outward investments, particularly across Africa and Southeast Asia, appear commercial on the surface, they function underneath as part of a deliberate strategic architecture. Beyond generating financial returns, these capital flows aim to align recipient nations with Beijing's broader strategic priorities. Foreign investment correlates directly with normative and political alignment, using voting behavior at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a key indicator of where capital should be deployed. Additionally, economic presence in soft-power spheres is utilised to encourage states to align their foreign policy goals with those of China.

Concurrently, China actively utilises established multilateral frameworks. Having socialised into global bodies ranging from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to the United Nations (UN), Beijing steadily expands its institutional influence within these organisations through budgetary contributions and administrative staffing.

Thus, China employs a dual strategy of exploiting existing international multilateral systems while leveraging its own specialised domestic institutions. Ultimately, this strategy mirrors historical precedents set by other major powers, such as the United States, which leveraged internal institutions to shape international behavior and embed systemic values into global governance architectures. The central point of analysis is not why China pursues this trajectory, but what mechanisms and structural instruments it employs to achieve statecraft objectives.

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DOMESTIC BASES OF PERIPHERAL POWER: LOCAL ACTORS ADVANCING CHINA'S BRI

The use of the term 'peripheral power' does not typically suggest a realist classification of power in terms of either understanding it in material or military capabilities. Similarly, the classification of various states as major powers, subregional powers, peripheral powers, etc., or what dependency theorists argue as the international division of labour, has historically led to unequal allocation of wealth creating spaces like core, periphery or semi-periphery, demands a more nuanced analysis while contextualising these categories vis-a-vis China. Instead, understanding periphery as a site of negotiation between the local or subnational actors and central political institutional elites in China is the conceptual foundation of the argument. While defining peripheral elites is not easy, they can be, however, described as a set of political actors leading the territorial margins of the Chinese state, connected to the center through a variety of configurations, sometimes working to carry forward the core apparatus and also working at counter or cross purposes.

This core-periphery dynamic gained attention with China's BRI announcement which has its roots in subnational ideas and practices and the silk route. Therefore, it won't be an exaggerated description if this is called as a more of a spatial fix than a geopolitical maneuver. These ideas were clear in the 12th five year plan, that China's subnational regions should play differentiated roles in developing linkages primarily economically with its neighbouring territories. Now on the international dimension of regional policy, the program has a section on raising the international openness for the coastal, inland and border regions of China - a process by which the peripheral areas are now being consciously transformed into nodes or global networks which enable them to circulate capital, global capital and commodities into the markets everywhere. In this process the local actors essentially become development brokers who are negotiating, mediating and also to a large extent structuring developmental interactions with the partner countries as well as with the central government institutions.

With regards to the role of the Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), they are often seen as tools of governance. But central and local SOEs diverge in their characteristics. While central SOEs are often seen as extensions of the Chinese party-state carrying out the national policies, the local SOEs, despite their affiliations to the central government, are deeply embedded in the local economy and local government's economic goals. In case of BRI projects, the local and provincial SOEs often team up with central SOEs that have been going out for decades who have the internationalisation experience and already possesses an expansive global footprint. For example, in 2020, Fujian provincial communication transportation group acquired a 23% stake in the subsidiary of China Merchant Port Holdings which holds 85% of Sri Lanka's Hambantota International Port Group. Now Fujian's provincial authorities branded an important measure to facilitate international logistics for the province's key industries such as textiles and garments. It's mainly the provincial or municipal SOEs that invest in overseas ports.

The role of local government also becomes important. BRI in fact had allowed some local governments to save loss-making SOEs. In Jiangxi, for example, the local government set up four funds to save energy chemical companies in the name of exploring overseas opportunities; now folding within the BRI mandate. There are many such examples, like the local steel makers who saw BRI as their precious opportunity to stay afloat. At the same time, these local governments are also actively involved in constructing narratives from below when it comes to BRI. What they do is interpret leaders' slogans, subsequent policies and in ways amenable to their interests, sometimes even skewing implementation significantly. They often take advantage of the vagueness of the entire BRI project to inject their own interest and visions into the policy document. What one can convincingly argue is that BRI projects do not emerge from a grand design drafted in Beijing, rather it can be seen as a local politico-business initiative.

Another dimension which is very significant is that the rivalry between the provinces and the interprovincial competition has also been a driving force for China's BRI project. This highlights the subnational dimension of BRI. So these projects reflect not a coherent master plan but rather competitive subnational dynamic underpinning BRI.

Finally, the role of China's domestic private actors in the BRI projects needs to be understood and their trajectory tells us a story of survival, which is about surviving competition from the SOE's. For them, BRI becomes the avenue when they are pushed out of intense competition in the domestic market. For example, China's power generation market has been dominated by SOEs, particularly the big five utility giants - Guian, Watian, Wanang, Tatang and the China Power Investment Corporation. So, while the Chinese government has been encouraging private investment in power generation, there has been little tangible progress in reducing entry barriers for non-state or private capital. Private manufacturers of solar panels and wind turbines are often the most vulnerable actors in the production value chain and thus seek opportunities for expanding in overseas markets. So, for them, BRI is an opportunity where they are able to act like project developers rather than just expanding exports. One can argue that BRI are not meticulously planned by top leaders, rather they are experimental, incremental, gradualist, loose policy envelopes whose parameters and implementation are shaped by internal struggle for power and resources. They are kept deliberately vague to accommodate diverse interests and much of the horizontal and vertical bargaining process around BRI projects happen within these coalitions. In these cases, the central government has deliberately withdrawn from directly controlling production and distribution and reiterated into what the political-economy refers to as the regulatory state model, setting broad macro economic policy for private and public actors.

DR. DON MCLAIN GILL
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SUB-CONVENTIONAL INSTRUMENTS OF CHINA'S MARITIME POWER PROJECTION

China's maritime power projection involves the use of sub-conventional instruments, commonly understood as part of its hybrid capabilities. The development of this approach reflects a relatively recent shift in China's strategic outlook. Traditionally, China's strategic culture and security perceptions were shaped by a predominantly continental perspective. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, a gradual shift towards maritime security and the defence of territorial interests began to emerge, marking an important change in China's overall power-projection capabilities. Historical developments indicate that this shift towards a maritime security outlook began as early as 1995, when growing awareness of the importance of the maritime domain started to influence China's strategic calculations. By 2009, under President Hu Jintao, greater emphasis was placed on recognising China's position within the broader maritime space, contributing to the promotion of the concept of a harmonious ocean. Nevertheless, it was at the 18th Communist Party Congress in 2012 that maritime security gained greater prominence in national strategic discourse. This marked an important stage in China's transition from a predominantly continental power towards an emerging maritime power, with a focus on protecting and advancing its interests across the maritime domain.

Under the administration of President Xi Jinping, this trajectory was further catalysed to enhance capabilities and far-sea operations, which initially took root starting in 2008 through modest fleet operations traversing the Indian Ocean for counter-insurgency and anti-piracy missions off the coast of Somalia. These operations eventually developed into a robust naval presence, fast-forwarding to 2017 with the establishment of China's sole offshore military base in Djibouti in the western Indian Ocean, significantly increasing China's security presence across both flanks of the Indo-Pacific. These sub-conventional means are closely linked to military-civil fusion, which has reduced entry barriers for private sectors into the defence industrial technology base, fostering a mutually constitutive partnership that expands the presence of the People's Republic of China's defence institutions. Prominent among these sub-conventional instruments is the deployment of the maritime militia, operating as a quasi-security defence-oriented fleet across the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. The maritime militia divides into two primary groups: a professional fleet whose main concern involves lingering, clustering, and occupying key features, and a much larger group known as the Spratly Backbone Fishing Vessels, which perform secondary militia responsibilities alongside regular commercial fishing activities.

Within the South China Sea region, the maritime militia operates alongside public and government vessels, including the China Coast Guard and the People's Liberation Army Navy, to execute presence operations, cluster, and occupy contested features. A prominent historical example occurred in 1995 when China occupied Mischief Reef, located approximately 120 to 129 nautical miles off the Philippine coast of Palawan within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone, which has since transformed into a full-fledged military base. The strategic significance of these naval and civilian groups lies in several factors: maritime militia vessels are extremely difficult to track since they cannot be reliably detected through Automatic Identification System platforms; they constitute the largest foreign fleet within the greater South China region operating alongside the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Coast Guard; and civilian vessels are deployed in place of government ships to sustain presence in disputed waters. Commercial infrastructure also acts as a vital strategic enabler, with China maintaining access to over 138 commercial ports across 94 countries, alongside a growing number of terminals owned, operated, and managed by domestic firms.

Regarding traditional basing alternatives, China has favoured a commercial and non-traditional footprint rather than traditional overseas military bases due to three fundamental challenges: the continental geography of the Chinese mainland, the global power distribution manifested through United States overseas bases and alliance networks, and the widespread deployment of precision-strike technologies that render fixed military installations inherently vulnerable.

The hybrid capabilities and sub-conventional warfare employed by China's People's Liberation Army Navy and coast guard pose various challenges to regional maritime security. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of coastal countries are at risk, while China's assertive actions restrict their ability to extract resources and access seafood within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). These challenges are evident in incidents such as the confrontation at Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ayungin Shoal, in the South China Sea, where Chinese forces obstructed a Philippine resupply mission. In this context, respecting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an international treaty that establishes the legal framework governing the world's oceans, seas, and marine resources, is essential. For the Philippines, violations of maritime law and UNCLOS pose a serious challenge to its sovereignty and maritime rights. China's inconsistent adherence to established maritime laws raises questions about its willingness to fulfil the responsibilities associated with its aspirations to become a great power. To prevent maritime insecurity from becoming a persistent source of tension in bilateral relations, China should respect the territorial waters of the Philippines and work together with coastal countries to keep the supply routes free and secure.

DR. HONG YU
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PUBLIC-PRIVATE STAKEHOLDERS IN CHINA'S GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY AMBITIONS

China is a rising power and an increasingly consequential player on the world stage. China's main economic statecraft plan, namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has exerted tremendous impacts on Asia and beyond since its launch in 2013. The BRI today remains as the central piece of China's international cooperation and economic strategy, as well as its foreign diplomacy. According to the BRI investment data published by the Griffith Asia Institute in February 2025, the cumulative BRI-affiliated overseas infrastructure construction and investments have reached US$1.17 trillion (with US$704 billion in construction contracts and US$470 billion in non-financial investments) since 2013. The BRI engagement has been led by the state-owned companies, followed by private companies.

Beijing's global connectivity ambitions are often discussed in terms of roads, seaports, railways, energy plants and digital communication infrastructure. However, to understand the BRI today, it is equally important to examine the various actors and stakeholders behind these connectivity projects. The BRI is not driven by the state alone. It involves a wider ecosystem of central ministries, provincial authorities, commercial banks, state-owned enterprises and private firms. That mix matters because it tells us not only what China is building overseas, how China organises, finances and delivers its global connectivity agenda, but also how Beijing is trying to manage the competing interests and tensions between commercial logic and strategic intent.

First, there is a clear division of labor between the public and private stakeholders under Beijing's BRI push. The overseas connectivity projects are overwhelmingly dominated by the state-owned enterprises, such as PowerChina, Sinopec, China State Construction Engineering, China Communicati-

on Construction Company, China Energy Engineering Corporation and Shandong Hi-speed Road and Bridge Group. Meanwhile, the investments made in manufacturing, mining, green tech and digital economy have been largely dominated by Chinese private firms, such as BYD, Zijin Mining, Gotion High Tech, TCL, Tencent, and Huawei. Beijing manages cooperation and competition between public and private stakeholders through a combination of strategic direction and market participation. The state sets broad priorities, but implementation often depends on firms that compete for construction contracts and financing. In practice, that means the Chinese authorities can encourage state and private firms into sectors it considers strategically important, such as green tech and digital sector, while still allowing market competition to determine who actually delivers. This operational arrangement allows China to mobilise a wide range of actors while still maintaining overall direction.

Second, commercial incentives and state priorities are not simply separate forces to be balanced; in many cases, they are fused. The commercial incentives and state priorities are intertwined across both Chinese-financed and Chinese-built overseas connectivity projects. On the one hand, China's overseas connectivity projects need to be financially viable and commercially sustainable, especially in a more risk-conscious environment than the early BRI era. On the other hand, the state continues to steer capital towards projects that serve geopolitical, industrial capacity cooperation or diplomatic goals. There is a strong demand for investments in green and digital growth to support the economic transition and industrial upgrading both in China and in many BRI countries. Manufacturing, green tech and digital economy have emerged as key growth sectors under the BRI implementation abroad over the past several years. China's private firms, such as Huawei, CATL and BYD, have become more active in overseas investment activities as the BRI is shifting from megaprojects to manufacturing (e.g. electric vehicles and batteries), green tech and digital economy (e.g. data centres and cloud computing). This suggests a more selective and differentiated approach since 2019 than in the BRI's earlier era. If the first decade of China's BRI drive was about building overseas presence, the next phase may be about building resilience, adaptability and influence through a denser web of public and private actors.

Third, the growing role of private stakeholder reveals the future direction of China's connectivity-led economic statecraft. According to China's Ministry of Commerce data, in 2024, non-public controlled firms accounted for 54% of China's non-financial outbound investment, compared to 46% in the public controlled entities. It suggests that the BRI is becoming a more diversified model leveraged on collaboration across different types of actors. That has two implications. First, private firms are likely to become even more important because they are often more agile in cross-border commercial adaptation. Second, the Chinese authorities will still matter enormously, but increasingly as a coordinator and enabler. The BRI has been constantly evolving and is flexible in response to changing commercial and geopolitical conditions. The future of the Initiative may therefore be less a single infrastructure building initiative, and more about a broader portfolio of projects and industrial sectors, stakeholders and partnerships. Nevertheless, the Chinese authority's ability to govern this public-private mix will be further challenged amid the shifting global geopolitical landscape. For the global policymakers, academia, researchers and business community, it will be more complicated to analyse China's external economic statecraft. The key issue moving forward is how public and private stakeholders interact with it. That interaction and collaboration could shape the scale, scope and sustainability of China's overseas connectivity ambitions.





SESSION 2:
HOW ARE CHINA'S DOMESTIC PRIORITIES AND FOREIGN POLICY SHAPING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER?



INDIA-CHINA IN THE 2020S: LESSONS, CHOICES AND THE BILATERAL'S GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE BY ORCA

The India-China relationship in the 2020s is unfolding amid profound geopolitical change and growing uncertainty in the international system. Following a decade marked by cooperation, competition, border tensions and cautious diplomatic re-engagement, the relationship offers important lessons on managing strategic rivalry, sustaining diplomatic dialogue and rebuilding trust amid persistent differences. This experts' dialogue will examine the lessons of the past, the policy choices confronting both countries today and the broader global significance of India-China relations. It will explore how the bilateral relationship interacts with shifting geopolitical dynamics, technological competition, evolving security challenges and economic transformation. The discussion will seek to unpack how the experience of the past decade has reshaped the strategic calculus of both New Delhi and Beijing. It will further consider the choices confronting the two countries as they navigate persistent structural differences, and what the future management of their relationship could reveal about the prospects for strategic coexistence, regional stability and a genuinely multipolar order in Asia.

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

The issues characterising the China-India relationship, particularly following the 2020 Galwan Valley episode, necessitate conceptual evaluation and a forward-looking assessment grounded in historical developments and past trajectories. Examining the decade spanning roughly from 2016 to 2026 reveals that while the classical boundary dispute remains a traditional historical reality that both nations will likely inhabit for decades, bilateral dynamics are heavily influenced by broader external conditionalities. Although categorised as external by India, these factors are viewed by Beijing strictly through the lens of internal sovereignty and core national interests.

From the Chinese perspective, a primary driver shaping bilateral ties involves developments surrounding Tibet, particularly the politics of the upcoming succession of the Dalai Lama. As the Tibetan spiritual leader has advanced past the age of 90, Beijing has grown increasingly anxious and has actively worked to institutionalise a state-controlled succession process rather than permitting a traditional, Tibetan-controlled transition. Evidence of this preemptive containment is found in a March 2025 White Paper, which highlighted numerous recognised reincarnated living buddhas, demonstrating that the Chinese Communist Party is accelerating institutionalisation, historical legal narratives, and central government authorisation rituals. For Beijing, political succession precedes reincarnation, a strategic approach that New Delhi must carefully monitor.

A second conditionality which is problematic for India-China relations is that the Chinese are quite categorical in their modernisation efforts across the Himalayas in terms of infrastructure, military deploy-

ment etc. These modernisation efforts had a direct role to play in China's advances during the recent Galwan clashes as well. It has provided the PLA with advanced options to grab more territory and resort to aggressive postures since forward posts and their continuous communications and supplies have emboldened China on the border. One critical development that is shaping the India-China relations and the entire Himalayan region is the Medog Dam. Not much has been given out in public about the dam, but in India, the focus should also be kept on this since it concerns the whole of the Himalayan communities. The Nepal flash floods, despite not having concrete data about it, can be attributed to the modernisation efforts in the Himalayan region.

The third external variable which is shaping the India-China relations is China's relations with a particular country in the Himalayan countries like Bhutan. The way they have negotiated the boundary issue at the tri-junction of Doklam, India should be mindful of that as well. India must also remain closely attuned to the evolving dynamics of Sino-USA relations. Trump's hint at creating a G2 between the USA and China is a worrying case for India. India, which has deepened its relationship with the USA beyond certain established red lines, could find itself in a difficult strategic position if Trump or Xi succeeds in resolving trade tariff disputes or bringing about a significant thaw in the competitive and rivalrous relationship between the two powers.

President Trump rolled the red carpet for Xi in their recent summit at Washington, and at the same time, made plans to levy 100% tariffs on both India and China for purchasing the Russian oil, but from the Chinese perspective, the tariffs are not meant for China. A wait and watch strategy should be applied to see the extent of tariffs imposed on China. For now Xi has successfully negotiated and lobbied Trump, and might have got positive responses from Trump regarding the Taiwan issue, critical minerals and other regional security issues. China's relations with Japan, South Korea and other neighbouring states also have to be watched. In international politics nothing should go unnoticed and the butterfly effect does not respect state borders. Any untoward step by China towards Japan can have adverse effects for India. The recent case of Israel-USA war with Iran is the most worrisome trend in international relations which had a direct effect on critical supply chains and India's domestic market.

Moreover, India's deepening relationship with Japan has also triggered China, particularly the Japanese investment in North East India. Due to this, the territory at the eastern side of India-China boundary is becoming more volatile. The reactions coming from the Chinese side like renaming Arunachal Pradesh and other regions, and India's cold approach to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor are some aspects of the relationship which India should be mindful of in times to come.

Finally, Tibet is a burning case of struggle to manage the already fragile relationship between India and China. India has traditionally supported the Tibetan populations and has a very good number of diaspora working within its borders. It has provided shelter, education and even jobs to the immigrants. The Tibetan government-in-exile and the coronation of the new Dalai Lama will be key factors to be watched in future relationships with both Tibet as well as China. That said, China is not very happy about India giving asylum to His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and has become an irritant at both the bilateral, multilateral and international forums. The importance of Tibet for China cannot be ignored given it has traditionally seen Lhasa as its integral part and is a very essential element of the whole unification and rejuvenation project of Xi. India will also face problems. Policies by the Trump administration and the Europe regarding the anti-immigration policies, especially for under-developed poor states, will have an effect on the Tibetan population as well. Given that phenomenon, there won't be a major change in the way India has traditionally seen the Tibetan question.

DR. SRIKANTH KONDAPALLI
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Traditionally, India has pursued a strategy of deterrence by denial, while China has relied on deterrence by punishment. Both countries view the border issue as a critical concern, and China's conventional and strategic superiority has, in many ways, enabled it to impose its will on India. However, 2020 marked a turning point in bilateral relations. Although the Kazan BRICS summit, the subsequent disengagement agreements and the resumption of patrolling signalled efforts to ease tensions; de-escalation and the de-induction of troops have lagged behind. Consequently, there are limits to the extent to which relations can be normalised. On June 15, 2020, border clashes resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, while China reported the deaths of four of its soldiers. By asserting themselves in the

Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific, both sides are also trying to strengthen deterrence without involving escalation.

While reports from India's Ministry of Defence suggest a reduction in Chinese troop deployment, there is limited information from Chinese sources to support this claim and the reduction in Chinese troop deployment has not been clearly established. China's Foreign Ministry has described the border situation as generally stable, while India's Ministry of External Affairs has stated that it remains stable but sensitive. These differing descriptions reflect the two governments' positions on the border situation.

There has been no meaningful de-escalation, as offensive military equipment and platforms have not been moved far away from the border. There has also been no clear de-induction of troops. The Indian Army Chief has mentioned the reinduction of troops in border areas, further highlighting the differences between the two sides. Additionally, confidence-building measures (CBMs) have proved inadequate, particularly in preventing incidents such as the Galwan Valley standoff.

Deterrence and managing escalation are major points of discussion, with the key dilemma facing India-China relations being how to separate deterrence from escalation. India now faces the need for deterrence in all directions, particularly on two fronts. During Operation Sindoor, it became evident that China had supplied military equipment to Pakistan, including J-10C aircraft, JF-17s, and HQ-9 surface-to-air missile systems. These uncertainties along the border have created the possibility of a two-front war under nuclear conditions, making deterrence in all directions an increasingly important feature of India's strategic thinking and placing additional pressure on the country. This raises the key question of how to manage competition without confrontation. Prime Minister Modi's approach of managing differences without allowing them to become disputes could help sustain bilateral relations by enabling the two countries to compete without cooperation and cooperate without requiring strategic convergence.

Peace and tranquillity remain essential for bilateral relations and have become central to India's strategic thinking since the Galwan clash, with India continuing to maintain this position despite limited progress towards normalisation. China, meanwhile, maintains that the territorial dispute should not overshadow other areas of the bilateral relationship, reflecting a degree of strategic convergence between the two countries despite their continuing differences.

Areas of mutual interest need to be identified and used to sustain engagement, while the dialogue process with China needs to be rethought. Before Galwan, India and China had around 30 dialogue mechanisms, including macroeconomic, strategic and financial dialogues, annual defence dialogues, youth dialogues, and steel dialogues. Since Galwan, only four have reportedly remained active, including meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC), corps commander-level meetings, and strategic dialogue at the foreign secretary level. This is a major issue which needs to be addressed: the urgency to maintain dialogue without demanding immediate resolution of all outstanding disputes. The only convergence that the two sides agreed upon was related to trade matters when Xi and Modi met at Kazan, on other issues the divergent opinions were expressed. This makes the dialogue process a protracted one with immediate impact on the overall bilateral relations

The strategic intentions of India and China also reveal significant divergences that could affect bilateral relations. At the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping outlined China's ambition to move towards the centre stage of world affairs, with the concepts of a community with a shared future for mankind, the Chinese Dream, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation serving as key indicators of this vision. The 20th Party Congress, held in 2022, further emphasised national security as a fundamental basis for China's national rejuvenation. These ambitions highlight a divergence between India's strategic outlook and China's vision for the regional and international order. India has not joined initiatives that do not align with its strategic interests, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Sovereignty concerns, particularly those related to territorial claims and infrastructure development, remain major sensitivities for India that China has not yet adequately addressed. Other important factors, including India's vision of Viksit Bharat, concerns over third-party interference, and the broader goal of a multipolar world are also important factors which cannot be ignored in their bilateral relations.



FOREIGN POLICY INSTITUTIONS, ACTORS AND DECISION MAKING IN THE NEW ERA

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

China's foreign policy is no longer the product of diplomacy alone. Under Xi Jinping, the CPC has fundamentally reconfigured the institutions, actors and decision-making processes that shape Beijing's engagement with the world. The growing centralisation of authority within the Party, the expansion of cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms and the integration of diplomatic, military, economic and political instruments have transformed both the formulation and execution of foreign policy. At the same time, China's external engagement increasingly relies on a diverse ecosystem of Party organisations, state institutions, provincial governments, commercial entities and security actors that operate alongside traditional diplomatic channels. These institutional changes are underpinned by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and the concept of a "New Type of International Relations," which together provide the ideological framework for China's external conduct. This panel will examine the institutional architecture, supporting actors, security dimensions and ideological foundations of Chinese foreign policy conduct, offering a deeper understanding of how Beijing conceptualises, coordinates and implements its diplomacy in an era of expanding global ambitions.

AMB. NEELAM D. SABHARWAL (RETD.) - *MODERATOR*
(Former Indian Ambassador, UNESCO and the Netherlands)

China's rise as the second biggest economy, a major trade, technology and military power in the world, matched by its confident and more proactive global outreach, has vastly transformed its foreign policy decision making in this era. The ideological foundation provided by Xi Jinping's concept of "National Rejuvenation" and now the "New type of International Relations", have brought a marked shift in China's low profile approach to a more ambitious foreign Policy in line with its strategic assertiveness to fulfill its global aspirations. The centralisation of authority within the Party on the one hand and integration of diplomatic, military, political, economic instruments and new actors on the other have vastly transformed, both the formulation and execution of Chinese foreign policy today.

Unlike the old system, foreign policy making is no longer the exclusive preserve of traditional diplomats and MFA under the paramount authority of the CCP. Since the Chinese international interactions cover nearly all major functional ministries, a plethora of different governmental actors have been added to the decision making. Prominent among the powerful ministries are: Commerce - with its claims to promote prosperity, and the PLA for defending China's sovereignty. Maritime interests and oil companies come as close seconds, with their claims to ensure energy security and exploration of fresh resources. Other important ministries are not averse to follow suit as they sense an apt opportunity. This has created a new challenge of competitive dynamics where bureaucratic actors have competing interests and their priorities and perceptions are shaped by their institutional affiliation and position within the government. Thus, foreign policy decision making is not organisational; but as Graham Allison describes, it is an outcome of bargaining process among bureaucratic actors advancing their parochial and sectoral interests. Thus coordination and balancing of multiple stakeholders, comprising different

organs and myriad bureaucratic agencies that the opaque Chinese foreign policy making relies on, is emerging as a major challenge. More serious are the rising turf rivalries, overlapping jurisdictions, infighting, fractious and “warring entities”. The problem is compounded by each actor claiming to operate in “national interest”.

However, foreign policy making is concentrated in the hands of the General Secretary. In the complex interplay between the Party, State and the National People’s Congress, the Party outranks all State structures and the Government. In its institutional architecture, responsibility and authority is well delineated, and rules are clearly established to function in a structured manner. The Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) as the highest body still makes all final decisions on major strategic and foreign policy issues, and oversees major relationships - such as with the US, Russia, Japan and North Korea. It follows international crises, studies and formulates long term decisions and makes shifts in policy as needed. It is assisted by the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC) upgraded from a Leading Small Group headed by Xi Jinping. The PLA functions as an armed wing of the party. The Central Military Commission (CMC) headed by Xi Jinping controls the PLA and dictates military and security policy. But the military wields considerable clout, and its operational and professional activities enjoys relative autonomy. The International Department of the CCP manages Party-to-Party Relations with both ruling and opposition parties.

Although formal and final foreign policy power in decision making remains unchanged, the question is how do multiple actors and institutions manage to get heard in the decision making apparatus? Foremost has been the redefining of the architecture of decision making and concentrating the power in the General Secretary. In 2014, CCP centralised more decision making power with the Leading Small Group (LSG) on Foreign Affairs, and late in 2018, LSG Foreign Affairs was elevated to a Commission. The fundamental role of the LSG Foreign Affairs, now upgraded as the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, is to cut across bureaucratic cleavages and overcome parochialism among the different Party-State entities. The Party-State continues to rely on the power CCP derives from its rightful leadership and “Hierarchical Authority” to achieve outcomes. Headed by Xi himself, it ensures consensus between the work of the Party and State and compliance with leadership of the CCP Line. It is this system that seems to be still working effectively even in the vastly transformed scenario of an expanded set of players and new stakeholders. But in the longer run, the absence of clear cut criteria and established guidelines on a hierarchy of priorities and stakeholders leaves open the risk of unregulated decision making in foreign policy.

Undeniably, the ultimate decision maker is Xi Jinping, and unlike his two immediate predecessors, he takes a strong personal interest in Foreign Policy and remains the sole coordinator of national security and foreign policy. This raises a question that if the present trend of centralisation of policy decisions foreshadow his gradual moving away from the principle of "collective leadership"? For the present, reaching consensus, or at a minimum, the perception of consensus among the CCP leaders continues to be extremely important for maintaining and projecting political unity and stability.

PROF. MINGHAO ZHAO
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INSIDE THE PARTY-STATE APPARATUS OF CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY

The core principles and concerns of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy can be understood through three key themes: prosperity, stability, and multipolarity. This framework forms an integral part of China’s broader vision for modernisation and national rejuvenation, which is to be achieved through a two-step strategy culminating in 2049. The years 2035 and 2049 are important milestones in this long-term vision. Sustaining economic growth and maintaining China’s economic momentum remain major priorities of its foreign policy. Stability is another central concern, particularly in China’s relations with major powers and neighbouring countries. Xi Jinping’s recent visit to the United States reflects Beijing’s efforts to stabilise bilateral relations and manage differences with Washington. Maintaining stable relations with major powers, including the United States, as well as neighbouring countries such as India, remains a top foreign policy priority for China. Multipolarity is the third key theme, reflecting China’s vision of an international order in which power is distributed among multiple centres rather than dominated by a single country. This emphasis is also evident in China’s long-term development planning. The Chinese leadership views the coming decade as a period of significant change and uncertainty, marked by geopolitical tensions and conflicts. The transition from US-led global primacy towards a multipolar order presents both opportunities and challenges for Beijing. This new buzz word for Chinese foreign policy was used at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs held in December 2023, whose

official readout stated that China should work towards “an equal and orderly multipolar world”.

The centralised leadership of the CCP is becoming the guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy and was formally codified in law in 2023. China’s Law on Foreign Relations, adopted in 2023, institutionalised this political practice through legislation, with Article 5 explicitly affirming the CCP’s centralised leadership over foreign affairs. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has also stated on several occasions that Party leadership is the most distinctive feature of China’s foreign policy and its greatest political advantage. In addition to the law, the CCP has also established regulations governing its leadership of foreign affairs work. This shows how laws and regulations highlight the centralised leadership of the party.

Such CCP leadership is embedded in a multi-layered system, headed by the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC), which was upgraded from the former Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. CFAC is the body in charge of top level design, overall coordination and enduring supervision of Chinese foreign policy. The Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office is the body in charge of the day to day work. This apex body is chaired by none other than CCP General Secretary who is the ultimate decision maker in China’s foreign policy, coordinating external policies vis-a-vis different states and sets the broader framework for the grand strategy. The Office of CFAC is headed by one of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s most trusted loyalists, whose influence over foreign policy often exceeds that of the formal state foreign minister. The two key institutions operating under the supervision of the CCP’s top leadership are the Politburo Standing Committee and the State Council. While the Politburo Standing Committee provides high-level political direction and shapes China’s broader strategic priorities, the State Council is responsible for the administrative implementation of policies through the state apparatus.

At the next level are ministerial and Party-level institutions, including the International Department of the CCP Central Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is also a critical actor, particularly in implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and coordinating China’s Five-Year Plans. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the principal diplomatic arm of the state, managing day-to-day foreign affairs, conducting bilateral and multilateral negotiations, and overseeing diplomatic missions and relations with foreign governments. It also coordinates with other institutions to advance and protect China’s national interests internationally.

The Ministry of Commerce plays an important role in shaping economic and trade policies, including foreign investment, trade agreements, and economic engagement with other countries. The Ministry of State Security is responsible for foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and identifying threats to China’s national security. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) also play important roles in supporting China’s security objectives and advancing its strategic interests. At the subnational level, provincial and municipal authorities, including those in Shanghai, Beijing and Shandong significantly contribute to China’s external engagement. Provincial and municipal Party committees, led by their respective Party secretaries, help guide local foreign affairs and coordinate international cooperation in line with the central leadership’s priorities.

The Central Conference on Work Relations to Foreign Affairs carries significant weight, having been convened three times. Notably, President Xi personally chaired last year's conference on neighbourhood diplomacy, which took place against the backdrop of the USA-China trade war. The pressures generated by the trade war with the United States prompted Xi Jinping to visit Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam as part of China’s efforts to respond to US economic pressure. The conference was also part of this broader strategy. China’s foreign policy operates through an integrated, top-down system that projects the influence of the CCP, Xi Jinping, and the Chinese state onto the global stage. This centralised mechanism reflects the dual Party-state structure, in which the Party exercises overall leadership while state institutions implement policies aligning with its directives.

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ANTI-CORRUPTION AND POLITICAL DISCIPLINE IN CHINA'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS

China’s foreign affairs (FA) framework is a broad system consisting of multiple departments and ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is only one of the players, but indeed the most important player in the system. A large share of China’s central-level foreign policymakers came from MFA in the

past. Besides MFA, there are other heavy weights in the FA system, such as International Liaison Department (ILD), which primarily manages relations with political parties in other countries, such as relations with North Korea. Diplomats can horizontally transfer from ILD to MFA, but usually mobility is limited within the FA system, This makes the FA system relatively professional and closed.

MFA itself is one of the largest central ministries in China. Its cadre corps is as large as 5000 people. As a contrast, the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection (CCDI), a super active player, if not the most active since the 18th party congress, generally has a permanent employee of around 1000 to 2000 people. The sheer size of the MFA makes it an important central bureaucracy that the Party Center needs to maintain control over, particularly given its significant role in foreign affairs. The MFA represents China internationally, implements central diplomatic policies and contributes to shaping international public opinion.

Within the MFA, although all personnel are generally referred to as diplomats, a significant proportion remain in China rather than being stationed abroad. Research suggests that these diplomats may have greater promotion opportunities than those who spend longer periods stationed overseas. This is partly because allegiance of overseas diplomats is always a concern of the central government.

With respect to the anticorruption campaign within the MFA since the 18th Party Congress, three aspects are particularly important. Taken together, these measures indicate that the Party Center has significantly tightened its supervision and control over the MFA, which had previously functioned as a relatively professional and closed system.

1. Central inspection is an old tool rejuvenated by Wang Qishan (老王 /Laowang) in 2013. The inspection system was expanded to achieve broad coverage of centrally managed agencies, including central ministries and other institutions, top universities, provinces and major state-owned enterprises. The MFA was also subjected to central inspection in 2016. The inspection team represents the Party Center rather than the CCDI itself, although the CCDI handles much of the implementation. Importantly, the Party Center has emphasised that these are political inspections rather than professional inspections. Their focus is therefore not primarily on professional performance but on issues such as corruption, political discipline and political loyalty. Political discipline includes loyalty to the Party Center and the enforcement and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought.
2. A second major change was the transformation of the MFA's internal disciplinary system into a centrally dispatched disciplinary office stationed within the ministry. This significantly strengthened supervisory authority because the discipline official could report directly to the CCDI rather than being fully embedded within the MFA's internal hierarchy. The MFA also conducts periodic internal inspections, with dedicated inspection teams established within the ministry. At China's embassies and consulates abroad, officials are responsible for discipline-related matters and periodically return to headquarters to report on their performance and integrity (述职述廉). This creates additional channels through which the Party Center can monitor personnel across the foreign affairs system.
3. A third significant development was the appointment of Qi Yu as Party Secretary of the MFA, marking an important departure from the traditional practice of appointing a career diplomat or an official with extensive foreign affairs experience to the position. Before joining the MFA, Qi Yu served as deputy head of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee. The Organization Department is responsible for the Party's personnel system, and its senior officials are expected to demonstrate strong loyalty to the Party Center and adherence to central guidance. The appointment therefore indicates the increasing importance attached to direct Party oversight of personnel within the MFA. It reflects a broader approach through which the Party Center exercises control over large and strategically important cadre systems.

The most important question is how these closer institutional ties with the Party Center affect China's foreign policy and diplomacy.

Overall, the increased control appears to focus primarily on political loyalty and discipline, potentially reducing opportunities for corruption, while leaving much of the professional conduct of diplomacy to career diplomats. However, according to one study, increased anticorruption pressure may encourage Chinese diplomats to adopt more assertive messaging in public communications as a means of demonstrating political loyalty. This highlights the importance of recognising that China's foreign affairs system operates before multiple audiences, including both domestic and international audiences. Political statements and diplomatic actions may therefore serve different signalling purposes simultaneously.

The “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy, for example, may in some instances be directed as much towards domestic audiences as towards foreign governments. Recognising these multiple audiences can help foreign governments better interpret Chinese diplomatic messaging and reduce the risk of misjudging the motivations behind particular statements or diplomatic behaviour.

DR. ZI YANG
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THE PLA AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY PROCESSES

China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) is the country’s highest national defense decision-making organ. China’s security priorities and strategies are also deliberated and decided at CMC meetings. Through institutional links with civilian foreign policy leaders, particularly Xi Jinping and the Politburo members, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) can exert influence on China’s foreign policy process, especially on matters involving defense and the use of force.

The PLA is assumed to be the most influential on issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Sino-Indian border, where ongoing disputes involve military considerations and give the PLA greater say in designing strategies. Since the PLA is a highly centralized organization, actions at the tactical and operational levels generally reflect orders from the theater commands based on CMC directives or guidance, rather than independent actions undertaken without central support. China’s current approach in these areas, including grey-zone activities and limited escalation, is best understood as CMC-approved strategies to advance wider foreign policy objectives. By strengthening PLA advantages on the ground, the Chinese government can gain more leverage in the diplomatic realm.

However, the current disruption within China’s military elite raises questions regarding CMC capacity. The anti-corruption campaign reached a severe phase in 2025, when some 62 senior officers were reportedly purged. By early 2026, the last two professional military officers and war veterans on the CMC —Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli—were removed. This left the CMC with only Chairman Xi and Vice Chairman Zhang Shengmin, a career political commissar with minimal combat experience. The absence of experts at the CMC level raises questions about the commission’s capacity to provide advice on security policy formulation.

Moreover, the purge of CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong in 2025 and Zhang Youxia in 2026 eliminated PLA representation on the Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo, which meets on a monthly basis to discuss important state affairs, including foreign policy. The purge of He and Zhang means that a critical communication forum between the military and civilian foreign policy elites has been overturned, presenting additional challenges for senior PLA officers seeking foreign policy influence.

From the PLA’s perspective, military diplomacy serves several important functions in building relations with foreign military counterparts and provides opportunities to shape their perceptions and understanding of China. Amid elevating global instability, China can portray itself as a stabilizing force to win over countries increasingly concerned about the future. Finally, military diplomacy provides the PLA with opportunities to gain insights into the advantages and shortcomings of foreign militaries, as well as their strategic aims and approaches, and even obtain valuable intelligence in the process.

China’s top military diplomat is none other than Defense Minister Dong Jun, who regularly attends high-level forums to articulate and reaffirm China’s positions on international affairs. Beyond senior-level diplomacy, China’s large military attaché corps conducts everyday outreach to local military counterparts in posted countries.

Participation in military exercise is another important medium of military diplomacy. The PLA conducts regular exercises with friendly states in its neighborhood and farther afield. In 2025, China conducted more than 25 military exercises with international partners, with Russia and Pakistan topping the list. Southeast Asian countries constitute another major group of exercise partners. With the exception of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei, China conducts regular exercises with ASEAN members that generally hope to maintain balanced and cordial relations between competing powers. Overall, these exercises reinforce bilateral ties, deepen military-to-military trust, and improve understanding among military leaders.

At the ideational level, China actively promotes its own security concept—the Global Security Initiative (GSI). First proposed in 2022 with the intent of reshaping global security governance and offering an alternative to US-led security frameworks, the GSI places a strong emphasis on sovereignty, arguing that the sovereignty of all countries should be respected and that no country's security should come at the expense of others. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of the UN and calls on states to respect the UN charter and refrain from unilateralism. The GSI also advocates resolving disputes through dialogue and consultation rather than through the use of force and sanctions.

While Chinese diplomats frequently promote the GSI, it has gained limited traction in a world increasingly engulfed by conflicts and unilateralism, especially from countries that share amiable ties with China. So far, rather than defense collaboration, the GSI has mostly resulted in public security cooperation agreements between China and friendly states. Although the GSI may enhance China's image as a champion of stability and bolster its standing among Global South nations, the relevancy of its ideas is under stress amid increasing geopolitical disorder. Many countries are increasingly in need of credible security guarantors and resolute global leadership, rather than ambiguous calls for international cooperation. Ultimately, the GSI is unlikely to become the new standard for international security in the near term.

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FROM DOCTRINE TO DIPLOMACY: XI JINPING THOUGHT AND THE "NEW TYPE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS"

The early traces of building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation, can be associated with President Xi's March 2013 visit to Kremlin. The project was stressed upon at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs held in November 2014 where the rationale behind forging a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation was laid. Xi's rationale presupposed thinking beyond the cold war binaries and power politics, in an era where nations want to cooperate in a positive sum game. Since then, building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation has become an important guiding philosophy for China's diplomacy. At the international level, this idea was put forward in September 2015, when Xi at the United Nations talked about keeping the UN charter alive and building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation, and making concerted efforts to foster a community of shared future for mankind. It's a realistic guide for Xi to propagate its own form of international relations when the US and the West are facing increasing criticism from all over the world.

To comprehend China's forward march to comprehensive modernisation, four principal building blocks have set China's course and consolidated its position in achieving its ambitions. The first can be called controlling the narratives through propaganda. In 2010 under Hu Jintao, China launched a major initiative to restructure China's propaganda apparatus and spread China's message to the world. The message was to let the world see China the way China wants to see them, because of the lot of propaganda going on against China. Around 59 billion yuan were allocated to refurbishing the entire apparatus and the broadcasters such as CGTN (a party news network mostly producing news and analysis in English language), etc were initiated and coming out to spread the Chinese message. Its reach was worldwide, and this was part of the diplomatic outreach in which China decided that it would try to reshape the opinions and narratives.

The second was the inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by Xi. It cannot be merely seen as a construction project, as it was a very well throughout and major initiative to control the globe. With the BRI projects, the CPC tried to link the natural resources centers around the globe with production centers in China using Chinese unemployed labour, surplus capital and unutilised construction technology over a China built communications artery. With passing years the Chinese have added the Maritime and the Digital Silk Route, and made it a comprehensive project in which to transport and use Chinese goods and services in a permanent and easy way. The payment side of it was interesting, since China wanted to do the transaction payments with the recipient nations in the US Dollars. This way China can replenish its coffers at the same time. BRI is a very comprehensive and far reaching effort which immediately impacted India with its China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project violating its territorial sovereignty. It was an effort to consolidate China's influence over the whole of the Global South. And the non-developed states. It also tried to penetrate the poor European states and influence them.

The important conference on Peripheral Diplomacy held by the People's Republic of China (PRC) merits a closer look. It set out what China's ambitions are and how it intends to go about reaching that. It was a major two-day conference, attended by the entire Polit Bureau Standing Committee addressed by Xi. All the important ambassadors to other countries and ministers were also part of it. A notable feature about this conference is that for the first time in the history of PRC, countries were categorised into two groups - friends and rivals - and based on this, China decided to forge regional and subregional bilateral security relationships. What is also important is that it promised a range of benefits, including financial gains, while those who did not subscribe to or align themselves with China's rise faced prolonged periods of suppression and oppression. Just before this, a proposal was also made for a new type of big power relations. The US rejected the proposal and was forcefully pushed by Xi in many different ways. Chinese academicians such as Yan Xuetong, explained the new type of big power relations. For him, the proposal of Xi to Obama in 2014 implied no desire for confrontation with the US, but that China will use alternative strategies to achieve global leadership. National rejuvenation, making China a technological power house, establishing international organisations and making China a major power in 2049, were the ambitions set out for the new set of international relations. This meant that China wanted to be at par, if not overtake the US. The materialisation of this initiative is a different thing, but China is actively working for such an international system.

The massive shakeup of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is unprecedented, with a major core of officials removed. The charges laid out against the top PLA leadership are of different nature. There is a narrative that is building that with the appointment of acting rank officers in certain key slots, the operational efficiency of the PLA has been blunted. The case is otherwise. With the lower rank officers in charge, they would be more tempted to follow instructions and take risky jobs to climb higher in the leadership hierarchy. This is what has to be cautiously analysed.

The visit by Xi to the US in 2026 is an indicator that China has risen to a considerable extent, and the US has decided to follow another policy of appeasement to deal with China. However, the US still has not accepted a new role for China at the international level, but they have understood that an outright confrontation at this point is not in their interest. What both sides are doing is buying time to manage their relationship, especially on the trade front.









Peacemaker or Powerbroker? China's Crisis Management in an Era of Global Conflict

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR. MIWA HIRONO
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When China engages in a conflict abroad- Is it acting as a peacemaker or a powerbroker? This question offers a window onto how China puts non-interference into practice in the Global South. China's influence in the Global South is increasing, and China can act as a powerbroker, exercising heavy influence over the decisions making parties in a conflict. However, such influence can contradict the principle of non-interference. Its expanding conflict resolution activities, including mediation, may require heavy influence over the parties' decisions. How does China make peace by using, or not using, its influence while claiming to uphold the principle? How far does "self-strengthening," the theme of this conference, explain its approach to crisis management?

The term zìlì gēngshēng, "regeneration through one's own power and efforts" or "self-strengthening," dates to Mao's wartime writings in the 1930s. It returned in the 1950s as a goal of Chinese foreign aid, helping developing countries to become self-reliant rather than dependent, and this spirit continues today with an added "relational" element. Over the past decade, in China–Global South relations, it has evolved into liánhé zìqiáng, "joint self-strengthening." Adding "joint" turns an inward-looking idea of development into a relational one, something China does with other Global South countries as equal partners. President Xi Jinping used the term at the United Nations in 2015, emphasising equality among Global South nations, including China, as countries sharing an anti-colonial history. In 2025, Chinese state media used the same term to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference.

Two official documents published in 2026 show that the term is firmly within state policy, but also reveal a subtle shift. The 15th Five-Year Plan Outline, published in March 2026, speaks of China as supporting the Global South in "joint self-strengthening," whereas the June 2026 white paper on global governance advocates for China as leading it. This change of verb within three months, from supporting to leading, captures the puzzle: is China an equal partner or a leader at the head of the group?

China's crisis management reveals varying degrees of balance between equality and leadership. China is increasing its mediation efforts because they serve its national interests. Mediation lets China demonstrate, or at least perform, international leadership distinct from the US and the EU models, which helps establish its moral legitimacy internationally. It also strengthens bilateral ties with each conflicting party and relations with regional bodies such as ASEAN, the Arab League, and the African Union. Finally, it protects investments and supply chains, including critical minerals, as in Myanmar.

CONCEPT OF ADDRESS BY ORCA

As conflicts around the world continue to reshape the international order, China has sought to position itself as an increasingly active diplomatic and strategic actor. Although Beijing projects itself as a neutral advocate of political settlement, its responses are driven by a complex balance of geopolitical interests, economic priorities and security concerns. This keynote address will examine how China calibrates its diplomatic posture and material involvement across different conflict theatres, including Iran, Myanmar, Russia-Ukraine, Thailand-Cambodia, Israel-Palestine, Pakistan-Afghanistan and others. It will also analyse Beijing's diplomatic narratives, influence over conflicting parties and the effectiveness of its mediation. The keynote aims to assess how Beijing is projecting itself as a credible crisis manager while also advancing its strategic interests.



On whether China is an equal partner or a leader, its record over the last several years shows three patterns. The first is more leadership, with substantial leverage and tangible results in the form of ceasefire agreements, while the principle of non-interference becomes questionable. This pattern appeared in China's mediation in Myanmar and in the Cambodia–Thailand conflict, both in 2025. The second is facilitative mediation, which maintains non-interference. China simply brings conflicting parties to the same table without pressuring either to follow a blueprint it has prepared. The 2023 Iran–Saudi Arabia mediation was a case in point. Although it succeeded in getting a deal signed, the agreement, hosted in Beijing with terms left to the parties, unravelled within two years, breaking down when the Iran war exposed its limits in 2026. China delivered agreements and its engagement with Iran and Saudi Arabia in the aftermath involved little powerbroking, and the results proved fragile. Third, in the hardest, highest-stakes conflicts, including Russia–Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, China was neither peacemaker nor powerbroker, and the peace process has seen no real progress. China either lacks leverage or has it and withholds it. As Russia's partner and a major buyer of its energy, China holds real influence over Moscow but has not used it.

Facilitative mediation or the non-use (or non-existence) of leverage, consistent with non-interference, remains the default, though the two Southeast Asian cases, Myanmar and Thailand–Cambodia, point toward more directive approaches using leverage. The equality and solidarity of "joint self-strengthening," in which China supports the Global South, are still reflected in much of China's crisis management. At the same time, China's leadership in conflict resolution in Southeast Asia is an emerging feature, and in both cases China used its leverage to help reach a ceasefire agreement.

Will China's "joint self-strengthening" remain an actual feature of crisis management, or become merely rhetoric? The answer may depend on which methods China considers best for advancing its national interests, and on whether it can obtain and afford sufficient leverage over the countries in conflict. China will walk a tightrope between leading and supporting, balancing national interests against the rhetoric that sustains its international legitimacy.





PANEL DISCUSSION 4

READING CHINA'S 15TH FIVE-YEAR PLAN: PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

CONCEPT OF PANEL BY ORCA

As China embarks on its 15th Five-Year Plan (FYP), the blueprint offers a clear articulation of Beijing's vision for the country's next phase of development, setting priorities that will shape governance, economic transformation, national security and international engagement through 2030. The Plan serves as a strategic roadmap for navigating an increasingly complex domestic and external environment, detailing how the Chinese leadership seeks to pursue long-term developmental objectives. Hence, the 15th FYP is an internal playbook for resilience to immediate economic, political, military, and diplomatic challenges that are relevant to external audiences. This panel will examine what the 15th FYP indicates about China's evolving strategic direction and the policy choices set to define the next five years, offering a multidisciplinary assessment of the opportunities, constraints and trade-offs embedded within Beijing's agenda.

MR. OMKAR BHOLE - *MODERATOR*
(Senior Research Associate, Organisation for Research on China and Asia, New Delhi)

The 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) provides an important framework for understanding how China intends to navigate an increasingly uncertain domestic and international environment, and shape its development trajectory over the next five years. Its significance extends beyond the setting of economic targets, as the Plan brings together economic transformation, technological advancement, national security, social development and external engagement within a broader conception of Zìlì Gēngshēng, or self-strengthening.

The Plan presents self-strengthening as a multidimensional process rather than simply a pursuit of economic or technological self-reliance. On the economic and technological front, it prioritises the development of new quality productive forces, advanced manufacturing, scientific and technological innovation, and closer integration between technological and industrial development. These priorities reflect efforts to strengthen domestic capabilities in strategically important sectors while improving the resilience of industrial and supply chains.

It also places development and security within an increasingly integrated framework. Strengthening national security capabilities and advancing integrated national strategic capabilities indicate that economic, technological and security objectives are being pursued in closer coordination. Similarly, the domestic dimension of the Plan is equally important. Employment, human capital development, population trends, social security and improvements in quality of life feature prominently within its development priorities. These areas are particularly significant for China's long-term development given demographic pressures, changing labour-market requirements and the need to sustain productivity growth. Self-strengthening therefore extends beyond industrial and technological capabilities to include

the development of the human and social foundations required to sustain national development.

At the same time, the pursuit of greater domestic capabilities does not imply withdrawal from the international system. The Plan calls for deeper cooperation with developing countries, implementation of the Global Development Initiative and greater provision of international public goods. China's approach therefore combines efforts to strengthen internal capabilities with continued external engagement. The 15th Five-Year Plan is significant as it brings together multiple dimensions of China's national development within a single strategic framework. It provides a broader understanding of Zìlì Gēngshēng as a project of building comprehensive national resilience and capability.

The Plan also offers an important indication of how Beijing is preparing for the next phase of China's development. The central question for the period to 2030 is consequently not simply what China seeks to achieve under the Plan, but how these interconnected priorities will reshape China's domestic transformation, strategic capabilities and engagement with the international system.

PROF. YANG YAO
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DEPLOYING NEW QUALITY PRODUCTIVE FORCES FOR HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

The upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) will further capitalise upon the progress achieved during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) and work towards achieving the goal of High Quality Development by deploying the New Quality Productive Forces which China has so far successfully managed to work with. The 14th Five-Year Plan functioned as an incubator for industrial upgrading and self-reliance, driving intense R&D spending toward critical breakthroughs in AI, advanced semiconductors, and green technology, while establishing global dominance in new energy vehicles under the "Dual Carbon" framework. Building directly upon these foundational achievements, the 15th Five-Year Plan shifts focus from localised innovation to deep market integration and scalable commercial applications, specifically targeting frontier sectors like quantum technology, aerospace, and smart manufacturing. Rather than pursuing unbridled GDP growth, the current policy framework prioritises total factor productivity and efficiency, optimising domestic data flows and removing regional protectionist barriers through a unified national market. While the 14th Five-Year Plan successfully modernised individual industrial segments and secured critical supply chains against external shocks, the 15th Five-Year Plan converts these isolated capabilities into a highly intelligent, resilient, and interconnected economic architecture. Together, these two macro-economic blueprints form a seamless, highly coordinated policy pathway towards China's 2035 socialist modernisation goals, cementing economic security and high-value industrial chain sustainability amidst intensifying global geopolitical volatility.

The 14th Five-Year Plan placed significant emphasis on high-quality development, making it a major priority for the Chinese government. Since the introduction of Five-Year Plans in the 1950s, their implementation had largely been managed by state institutions, particularly the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), with the Party playing a less direct role. However, the Party now plays a more direct role in guiding the planning and implementation process. From the 15th Five-Year Plan onwards, zìlì gēngshēng (self-reliance) is expected to capture the essence of China's development strategy. The plan focuses on two key priorities. First, China aims to build a more complete industrial system by strengthening industrial capabilities, improving competitiveness, and modernising production to establish a comprehensive and self-reliant industrial base. Second, it emphasises technological self-reliance, with China seeking not merely to follow existing developments but to lead technological innovation. The rationale behind these priorities is clear. China is entering relatively uncharted territory in several technological fields, where established models and precedents are limited, creating the challenge of "zero-to-one innovation" and developing entirely new technologies rather than improving existing ones. Meanwhile, strategic competition with the United States has added further pressure, particularly under President Donald Trump's second administration, through additional trade tariffs and tighter export controls on China. These measures have intensified the trade war between the two countries and, while intended to restrict China's access to critical technologies, have also had negative economic consequences for the United States.

US export controls pushed China to accelerate the domestic production of advanced semiconductors and use critical minerals as bargaining chips.This served as a wake-up call for China, and from a Chinese perspective, created an opportunity to strengthen its technological capabilities. China took these restrict-

ions seriously and launched new initiatives to manufacture more advanced chips at lower costs. Huawei has emerged as an important platform for technological innovation, reinforcing China's efforts to strengthen innovation and build a more complete industrial system. The economic competition between the two countries cannot be separated from their broader geopolitical and great-power rivalry. The US seeks to constrain China's rise and limit its growing influence across regions and sectors, while China aims to implement a comprehensive development strategy focused on high-quality development and maintaining cooperative relations with other countries.

Taiwan is another important factor in China's overall strategy. China maintains that peaceful reunification is its preferred option, although the US does not support China's position on the issue. From Beijing's perspective, reunification with Taiwan is essential to national rejuvenation. China therefore seeks to strengthen its technological and military capabilities in preparation for potential challenges to reunification. This explains its emphasis on civil-military fusion and civil-military integration across institutions and facilities. The Integrated National Strategic Capabilities (INSC) programme aims to strengthen China's preparedness for unforeseen contingencies involving the US or other external actors. The Taiwan factor therefore remains central to China's development strategy, which also seeks to protect critical minerals and supply chains from potential US pressure, particularly given Taiwan's strategic importance in the global semiconductor industry.

Balanced growth in all sectors, with a simultaneous focus on innovation and domestic consumption without undermining either, remains an important feature of Chinese politics. China's transformation from a poor, underdeveloped country into a major global economy offers an important perspective on its trajectory towards national rejuvenation. From the 1950s, when the country had limited economic and industrial resources, to the present day, when it has developed capabilities across a wide range of sectors within its border, is a testament to its innovation and resilience. Its current development plans continue to build on this progress, with the aim of achieving high-quality economic development.

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SAVING UP FOR SECURITY: CIVIL-MILITARY FUSION AND INTEGRATED NATIONAL CAPABILITIES

Security has become an overarching concept that extends beyond its traditional meaning, which was largely associated with the military and conventional defence capabilities. Modern states have begun to integrate different aspects of national power and develop security mechanisms that connect civilian, military, scientific, and commercial sectors. Modern warfare and strategic competition are no longer confined to traditional battlefields or defence laboratories. Military advantage increasingly depends on dual-use technologies developed in universities, commercial startups, and the wider technology sector. China believes that reducing the institutional divide between the defence sector and the civilian economy allows a country's overall economic and technological strength to be converted into effective and sustainable defence capabilities. There are several important aspects of security within an integrated civil-military framework. The first is the use of civilian technologies for military purposes, as many technologies originally developed for commercial use can also serve defence needs. The second involves the dual use of civilian infrastructure, allowing civilian and state networks, facilities, and logistics systems to support both civilian activities and national security objectives. The third is reducing bureaucratic barriers and encouraging innovation through greater cooperation between the public and private sectors. The fourth involves aligning defence needs with broader development priorities so that the state can rely on a resilient and integrated system during times of crisis.

This reflects the approach adopted by modern states, in which security is not determined solely by the size of the defence budget, but also depends on building strong, integrated national capabilities that can withstand non-traditional and sub-conventional threats. To achieve this, the state seeks to bring together talent, resources, and technological capabilities across both the public and private sectors to develop a unified national security architecture. Contemporary China under President Xi Jinping has meticulously pursued this approach through its civil-military fusion strategy.

The Integrated National Strategic Capabilities (INSC) programme did not emerge in a vacuum, and its historical development and context are important to understanding its evolution. It developed from civil-military integration to civil-military fusion and eventually took its present form as Integrated Natio-

nal Strategic Capabilities. This progression was driven by the limitations of both civil-military integration and civil-military fusion. These included an excessive focus on research and development (R&D) at the expense of other stages of the procurement process, persistent bureaucratic and functional barriers between the defence and civilian industrial sectors, and the limited indigenous foundations of civil-military fusion. These shortcomings encouraged China to move towards a more comprehensive approach through the development of INSC.

President Xi began using the concept in 2016, although it remained relatively low-profile until September 2020. After 2020, it gained greater momentum, and the Chinese 'Government Work Report' published on March 5, 2026 further highlighted its importance in China's national priorities. The six priorities of INSC include promoting collaborative innovation; accelerating the development of strategic capabilities in emerging technologies; strengthening the defence industrial base; expanding strategic capacity and intensifying efforts to develop strategic infrastructure and integrate strategic resources; improving coordination between national development and national security; and supporting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in achieving its centenary goals by 2027.

Xi Jinping has promoted Integrated National Strategic Capabilities (INSC) as part of his efforts to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. His approach moves beyond Western-style defence structures and seeks to integrate the economy and national security into a unified system. He recognises that cutting-edge technologies increasingly originate in the private commercial technology sector, meaning China cannot rely solely on traditional state-owned defence enterprises. Centralising political authority is also an important part of this approach, with Xi leading the Central Commission for Military-Civil Fusion Development. His broader strategic concerns include great-power competition, Taiwan, and the Indo-Pacific, all of which require a more comprehensive and integrated approach to national security, as envisaged under INSC.

The structure of INSC is largely top-down, with the Central Commission for Military-Civil Fusion Development at the top and three other sets of initiatives operating below it. The shift towards INSC was driven by the operational and strategic limitations of earlier approaches to civil-military integration and civil-military fusion. Previously, civil-military integration was primarily bilateral and transactional, focusing on the transfer of capabilities from the civilian sector to the military. Civil-military fusion adopted a more multidirectional approach, seeking closer cooperation between civilian and military sectors. INSC represents a further shift towards a system-of-systems approach that integrates capabilities across the whole of society. It seeks to address the limitations of earlier models, including resistance from established state-owned defence enterprises and persistent institutional barriers, by promoting a more comprehensive integration of national resources and capabilities.

This approach brings together several key elements, including the dual use of advanced technologies, industrial self-reliance, standardisation of infrastructure and logistics, expansion of strategic reserves, resource resilience, resilience of space infrastructure, institutional reform, and legal institutionalisation. The dual use of maritime and other technologies, for example, can support the People's Liberation Army's logistics and operational requirements. This is a holistic approach in which different civilian and military components are integrated into a unified system. Civilian resources, industrial capabilities, and technological support contribute to military modernisation, while defence capabilities, in turn, help protect the infrastructure and resources on which national development depends. Each component is connected to and reinforces the others. India also has historical examples of civil-military integration, including during the Gupta period and beyond, which hints at India's deep and cultural understanding of the art of war. There are growing calls in India to strengthen civil-military integration and learn from its historical experience. China's approach and its creation of a vast and resilient structure offers useful lessons that India cannot ignore.

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WHITHER NATIONAL REJUVENATION? BALANCING SOCIAL WELFARE AND GOVERNANCE PRIORITIES

The Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan, adopted in March 2026, is the first complete planning cycle in which China must govern under conditions of sustained demographic contraction. Officials describe this quinquennium as a "crucial link" on the path to basic socialist modernisation by 2035 and, beyond

that, to the long-horizon objective of national rejuvenation. The document therefore does more than allocate growth targets. It attempts to recompose the relationship among economic performance, family formation, social protection, and the maintenance of order.

Part XI of the Outline is devoted to "improving the population development strategy and promoting high-quality population development." Chapter 37, on building a birth-friendly society, is the operational core. Its stated aim is not a return to earlier volume, but the stabilisation of newborn numbers and "long-term balanced population development." The instruments are familiar from the late 14th Plan period and now systematised: a national childcare subsidy of 3,600 yuan per year for each child under three, already claimed by more than 25 million infants in 2026; expansion of maternity insurance toward flexible and platform workers; an ambition of no out-of-pocket cost for inpatient delivery within policy coverage; full implementation of maternity leave; encouragement of flexible hours for parents of children under three; housing preference for multi-child households; and a binding-adjacent target to raise the nursery enrolment rate for children under three by six percentage points.

What is distinctive is the attempt to treat female employment and family formation as jointly solvable. The employment-first strategy issued in June 2026 lists the care economy-healthcare, childcare, elderly care-as a principal source of new service jobs. Employers are urged to create on-site or nearby nursery places. Advisers to the political consultative process have proposed subsidies for small firms that retain women after childbirth and a special fund to socialise the cost of leave. In official language, women are to remain in the labour market and to form families at a higher rate, with the state absorbing a larger share of the cost of care.

The architecture is internally consistent only if two assumptions hold. The first is that the binding constraint is price-childcare fees, medical bills, housing-rather than opportunity cost, housing insecurity, or the distribution of unpaid work inside the household. The second is that public and employer-provided care can be scaled fast enough to alter fertility expectations among cohorts whose marriage registrations have already fallen sharply. The Plan does not set a fertility target. It sets service targets. That substitution is revealing. Quantity is no longer promised; quality of population, years of schooling of the working-age group (from 11.3 to 11.7 years), and the "human capital" of a still-large labour reserve are the substitute metrics. Health officials, as recently as mid-September 2026, continue to describe eight million annual births as evidence of a "relatively ample" labour reserve.

Gender equality appears in supporting commentary as a condition of a birth friendly environment, not as the organising principle of the chapter. The residual risk is well known in comparative demography: if leave, flexible hours and nursery places remain unevenly provided, the same policy mix can depress rather than raise female participation, even as it fails to lift births. The data of the last decade already show participation drifting down while fertility has not recovered. The 15th Plan multiplies instruments without altering that joint trajectory in its first months of implementation.

National rejuvenation, in the Plan's grammar, is not only an industrial or civilisational project. It is a social one. The Recommendations of October 2025 already listed "gaps and weak links" in public well-being and "new challenges for economic development and social governance" arising from demographic change. The Outline answers with a thicker set of livelihood indicators than its predecessor. Of twenty headline targets, seven concern public well-being more than one third. New or refined measures include the share of nursing beds in elderly-care institutions (to 73 percent), the under-three nursery rate, separate counts of physicians and nurses per thousand population, life expectancy to 80 years, urban surveyed unemployment below 5.5 percent, and income growth kept in step with GDP. Basic old-age insurance coverage is to remain above 95 percent. Long-term care insurance is to move from pilots toward national coverage by 2028.

Common prosperity is restated as a defining feature of Chinese modernisation. They sit inside a second principle that the document treats as co-equal: coordinating development and security. The security chapter is no longer confined to food, energy and defence. It includes social governance, public safety, the prevention of major accidents, and the construction of a "Peaceful China" at a higher level.

Social well-being is valued because it underwrites the political and demographic conditions of rejuvenation. A birth-friendly society, a thicker pension and care system, and high-quality full employment are the social face of a project whose other faces are technological self-reliance, a modernised industrial system, and a reinforced national-security shield. The Plan is unusually explicit

that uncertainties will rise over the next five years and that the task of holding development and security together will become harder.

One consequence is the targeted services for the very young and the very old receiving new quantitative markers; broader questions of household bargaining power, the quality of urban employment for young graduates, and the fiscal capacity of local governments to deliver the new entitlements receive less operational precision. The care economy is to absorb labour even as it is asked to cheapen the cost of raising children. Pensions and long term care are to become more generous and more sustainable at the same moment that the contributor-to-beneficiary ratio deteriorates.

In the guiding principles, "high-quality development" is the main theme of economic and social work. It is defined as growth that improves structure and total factor productivity, raises the household consumption share of GDP, advances green transition, and proceeds in step with common prosperity and national security. New quality productive forces-innovation, advanced manufacturing, the digital and green transformation-are its supply-side core. On the demand side, income growth synchronised with GDP, a larger middle-income group, and equalised basic public services are to convert livelihood improvement into a more robust domestic market.

Economic development is still named as the central task. Annual GDP is to stay in a reasonable range, with 2026 guidance in the band of 4.5 to 5 percent. Livelihood indicators are mostly anticipatory rather than binding; education years and a few green metrics are the principal binding social-adjacent targets. Security is not a constraint that yields to welfare; it is a co-equal organising principle. High-quality development, in other words, does not dissolve trade-offs. It redescribes them as complementarities-welfare as demand, care as employment, family policy as human-capital policy, stability as the premise of growth.

Whether complementarities of this kind materialise is an empirical question the Plan cannot settle in advance. Comparative experience suggests that fertility responds weakly to modest subsidies when the opportunity cost of a second child remains high and when housing and career penalties are concentrated on women. It also suggests that an expanding care sector can raise measured employment without reducing the gendered burden of unpaid work. And it suggests that welfare systems built rapidly under fiscal strain tend to ration quality even as they expand coverage. None of these observations requires one to deny the scale of what is being attempted: a national childcare allowance, a push toward near-universal maternity coverage, a six-point rise in under-three enrolment, a 73 percent nursing-bed share, and a life-expectancy target of 80. They do require one to notice that the Plan's social ambition is calibrated to governance continuity as much as to household welfare.

The 15th Five-Year Plan reads national rejuvenation as a problem of simultaneous repair of the age structure, of the consumption share, of the care deficit, and of the security environment. It marks a shift from covering the population to targeting the points of greatest demographic stress-infancy and advanced old age. It elevates "investment in people" to official strategy. It also leaves visible the older hierarchy in which social policy is justified by its contribution to stability, productivity and the long arc of rejuvenation. The next five years will test whether a birth-friendly society can be built at the same time as a tighter security order and a still-demanding growth path-and whether women, whose participation has been falling for a generation, can be both the labour reserve and the demographic solution the Plan requires.

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CHINA'S GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE IN AN ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

The 15th Five-Year Plan makes only a passing reference to the Global Development Initiative (GDI), mentioning it just once in the entire document. This suggests that the initiative does not receive significant attention within the plan itself. However, its broader significance cannot be overlooked and must be understood within the strategic framework in which it operates. The plan mentions the GDI alongside four other global initiatives in the context of Xi Jinping's vision of a Community of Common Destiny.

The Community of Common Destiny represents China's vision for shaping the future international order. However, is it a coherent vision with clearly defined, quantifiable, and testable objectives at every

level? The answer is largely no, as such broad strategic visions are often deliberately framed in general terms. The Community of Common Destiny is built on four key pillars: the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilisation Initiative, and the Global Governance Initiative. China's premier project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is another key part of this overall strategy. The broader purpose behind this grand structure is to redefine China's engagement with the world. This provides the context for understanding the GDI.

The GDI was announced in September 2021, and this presents a useful timeline for three events. First, China had just achieved its goal of becoming a moderately prosperous society alleviating poverty, which means the domestic problem of absolute poverty seemed to have been resolved, at least on paper. Second, the idea of what can be done externally with this condition of relative prosperity of the Chinese state gave a push to the BRI and coincided with the fact that it has been facing severe criticism around the world for being economically extractive, and debt-imposing. The data suggests that, across countries receiving Chinese economic assistance, Chinese diplomats engage effectively with state institutions and political elites but do not necessarily establish strong connections with the local population. This led to a change in China's approach and the narrative surrounding its economic engagement with other countries. Third, the GDI emerged at a time when China faced both significant opportunities and considerable pressure, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the virus's origins in Wuhan, China, became a source of international criticism. A shift in China's international narrative was therefore seen as necessary. This does not mean that any one of these factors directly led to the creation of the initiative; rather, they formed the broader set of conditions within which the GDI was articulated. The initiative sought to address criticism of China's economic diplomacy by aligning its development agenda with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This may also explain why President Xi Jinping announced the initiative at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

The eight priority areas listed in the 15th Five-Year Plan like poverty alleviation, pandemic response, financing of development, climate and green development, digital economy, digital connectivity, etc. are important metrics to be taken into account. Five years after the launch of the GDI, reports on its achievements remain inconsistent. A report published by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs last year indicated that around 1,800 projects, both large and small, had been completed. However, media reports from Beijing and Xi Jinping's own remarks in New Delhi cited different figures, referring to approximately US$ 23 billion mobilised and around 2000 projects undertaken in one instance, and US$ 20 billion mobilised and 2,000 projects completed in another. These differences make it difficult to assess the initiative's achievements and weaken the consistency of China's narrative, even before considering whether the projects are cost-effective. Several institutions have also been established under the GDI, including the Global Development Promotion Centre, the Global Centre for Livelihood Development, and the Global Knowledge Network. These institutions support training in areas such as agriculture and engineering. As the GDI expands into different sectors, further initiatives and institutions may emerge to support its implementation.

The GDI differs from the BRI in one important aspect: it is not being implemented solely by Chinese firms but through partnerships with several multilateral agencies, including UN agencies. This challenges the argument that China's international engagement is unilateral and coercive. These partnerships also reflect the lessons Chinese diplomats have learned about how to engage more effectively in economic diplomacy.

The GDI's future potential lies in its value as a relatively low-cost diplomatic tool. It allows China to carry out development projects in areas ranging from agriculture to artificial intelligence, with a direct impact on people's lives. This can help China build a more positive image and present itself as a more appealing partner rather than an extractive one. As the United States appears to be pulling back from parts of its global engagement, particularly in healthcare, human development, and human rights, China has more opportunities to expand its role. The reduction in US engagement across some of these sectors creates space for Beijing to strengthen its international partnerships, and the GDI provides a useful means of doing so. If the United States continues to reduce its engagement in these areas, China will have greater opportunities to expand its presence and influence.



29TH SEPTEMBER 2026

SPECIAL ROUNDTABLE AND ROUNDTABLES I, II, III

Day 2 of GCNS 2026 hosted confidential roundtables under Chatham House Rule and detailed deliberations are not available for public release.

DAY 2

STRATEGIC BLIND SPOTS: CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ON CHINA

The Special Roundtable was designed to examine the fundamental assumptions made by academics and analysts in their assessments of key questions relating to China. The discussion focused on an examination of China's post-COVID economic resilience, its evolving approach towards international institutions, and the domestic political dynamics shaping its policymaking under President Xi Jinping. It began by questioning whether China's economic performance following the pandemic reflected genuine structural resilience or the continued influence of state intervention. The distinction between China's earlier development model and its subsequent economic transformation was highlighted, challenging the perception that its success was primarily driven by centralised planning. While state direction and the ability to implement policies contributed to China's initial industrial development, the country's economic expansion during the reform period was largely attributed to market-oriented reforms. Particular emphasis was placed on the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, the expansion of private economic activity and China's accession to the World Trade Organisation under Zhu Rongji during the 1990s. Infrastructure development was also contextualised as a response to economic slowdowns rather than the original foundation of China's growth. The two major waves of infrastructure investment, following the Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis, were described as counter-cyclical interventions intended to stimulate economic activity.

The conversation focused on China's approach to reforming the existing international order. Rather than seeking to dismantle established institutions and replace them entirely, Beijing was characterised as pursuing an incremental and evolutionary approach through multilateral and plurilateral platforms. Institutions such as BRICS, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) were discussed as mechanisms for expanding non-Western participation in global governance. These arrangements were viewed not necessarily as alternatives to existing institutions but as supplementary structures through which China could strengthen its influence and promote a greater Asian role in international rule-making. However, the ability to lead such institutions remains constrained by the complexities of multilateral decision-making, which requires negotiation and consensus among participants. The discussion also highlighted the distinction between China's evolutionary approach to global institutional reform and its more assertive interventions in selected areas, particularly infrastructure connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Another important dimension discussed was China's expanding role in international conflict mediation. Its engagement in South Sudan and Myanmar illustrated two different experiences of peacemaking. In South Sudan, China gained acceptance by supporting African Union-led processes and providing financial and diplomatic assistance without imposing an independent political blueprint. Its position has benefited from existing scepticism towards Western involvement. Myanmar, however, presents a more complicated environment, where China exercises direct leverage over conflicting parties but simultaneously faces criticism regarding its political and military involvement. The continued supply of weapons to different actors has generated questions about the consistency of its mediation efforts. These examples highlighted how local actors can welcome Chinese involvement when it advances their interests while remaining cautious about excessive external intervention.

The discussion then turned to the relationship between Xi Jinping and the party-state apparatus, particularly the question of trust within China's political and military leadership. Trust was described as a multilayered and dynamic relationship that cannot be directly measured, with obedience and compliance serving as its most visible indicators. Although Xi seeks to maintain confidence in his cadres and commanders, the concentration of authority and the anti-corruption campaign have created an environment in which complete trust remains difficult to establish. The conversation also examined whether China's leadership transition could be managed smoot-

hly. Given the limited historical precedents for orderly succession within the Communist Party, the possibility of factional competition and interpersonal power struggles was considered significant. The absence of clearly established succession procedures, combined with Xi's dominant political position, makes the eventual transition particularly uncertain. Economic resilience emerged again as a central concern, particularly in relation to China's domestic consumption and demand. The discussion questioned whether the country's capacity to withstand external shocks could be sustained without addressing weak household consumption, declining consumer confidence and difficulties in the property and financial markets. The existing policy emphasis on manufacturing, technological self-reliance and high-tech industries was presented as a deliberate strategic choice, particularly following the deterioration of relations with the United States during the first Trump administration. China's leadership increasingly views dependence on external technology as a vulnerability requiring domestic capacity-building. However, the concentration of resources on manufacturing and technological advancement has come at the expense of other sectors. It was argued that China need not necessarily choose between innovation and consumption, pointing to the period between 2012 and 2018, when financial liberalisation, rising household consumption and strong innovation performance occurred simultaneously. This raised questions about the sustainability of the current economic model and whether domestic demand can recover without broader structural adjustments.

The exchange also explored the implications of China's institutional ambitions for India. It was suggested that New Delhi's concerns do not necessarily arise from the idea of reforming the international order itself, since India and China have historically shared certain positions on reforming institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Their cooperation within BRICS demonstrated the potential for complementary approaches towards increasing the representation of emerging economies. However, differences become more pronounced when China seeks to exercise leadership over the process of institutional reform. China's expanding infrastructure presence in South Asia and Southeast Asia was discussed alongside the growing involvement of Japan and the European Union through initiatives such as the Global Gateway. These developments introduce additional competition in India's neighbourhood, particularly across Northeast India and the Bay of Bengal region.

Towards the latter part of the discussion, attention returned to China's mediation principles, particularly the relationship between neutrality and non-interference. Its preference for facilitative mediation, involving the creation of platforms for conflicting parties to engage, was distinguished from more interventionist approaches. However, maintaining neutrality becomes complicated when China engages with governments and non-state actors simultaneously. Its approach was described as an attempt to balance engagement with different parties while avoiding the political costs of openly endorsing controversial actors. The role of the United States in conflict resolution was also examined, with the conclusion that Chinese involvement does not necessarily displace American influence. In some situations, particularly where US credibility has weakened, China has greater room to operate, while in others, mediation efforts involving China, regional organisations and the United States can prove complementary.

The final segment revisited the relationship between political loyalty, bureaucratic compliance and leadership succession. Concerns were raised that the anti-corruption campaign has encouraged local officials to adopt a passive approach to policymaking, fearing disciplinary action for administrative mistakes. Consequently, the party leadership has increasingly emphasised the need for officials to demonstrate both obedience and effective policy implementation. Evidence of widespread personnel corruption and informal networks involving senior officials further illustrated the institutional challenges confronting the leadership. The discussion concluded by considering the Party as an institution extending beyond the authority of any individual leader. Xi Jinping's political legacy was viewed as having reshaped the party's ideological and organisational culture, making the question of succession more complex. Any future leader will therefore inherit not simply an established political structure but an institutional environment shaped by Xi's emphasis on ideological discipline, moral authority and centralised leadership.

CHINA'S EMERGING VECTORS OF REGIONAL CONTESTATION IN SOUTH ASIA

The discussion examined China's engagement with South Asia, focusing on the strategic, economic, technological and geopolitical considerations shaping its regional approach. It began by situating South Asia within China's neighbourhood policy, noting that Beijing's priorities in the region has become more systematic, particularly under Xi Jinping. While Central Asia and Southeast Asia have traditionally received greater attention in China's neighbourhood strategy, South Asia has acquired increasing importance since the late 1990s. Early initiatives such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor reflected China's interest in connecting its southwestern provinces with neighbouring economies. This approach has since expanded through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), development partnerships and a range of multilateral initiatives, including the Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, Global Civilisation Initiative and Global Governance Initiative. However, the implementation of these initiatives has encountered varying degrees of difficulty, with concerns surrounding project delays, political instability and sovereignty.

The conversation subsequently shifted towards China's expanding maritime presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Its engagement was traced through three significant developments: the deployment of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels for anti-piracy operations off Somalia in 2008, the deployment of submarines in the Indian Ocean in 2014, and the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. Despite this growing operational presence, China continues to face limitations in terms of its familiarity with the Indian Ocean environment and its maritime operational experience compared with India and the United States. To address these gaps, Beijing has progressively strengthened its maritime domain awareness capabilities through surface and subsurface assets, space-based systems and ground infrastructure. The use of PLAN vessels, the China Coast Guard, maritime militia and research vessels enables the collection of information relating to navigation, anti-submarine warfare and undersea infrastructure. These capabilities are complemented by the BeiDou satellite navigation system, reconnaissance satellites and telemetry, tracking and command stations established across the Indian Ocean region. The integration of civilian and military assets has consequently enabled China to expand its maritime reach while maintaining a relatively low-profile presence.

The discussion also explored how Chinese influence operates differently across individual South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, engagement was described as extending beyond central political institutions to include local political actors, municipal authorities and business networks. Chinese companies have participated in infrastructure projects in areas such as Rangpur, establishing relationships with influential local representatives. A similar pattern was observed in the ready-made garment sector, where Chinese companies have steadily expanded their presence since 2018. This arrangement allows Chinese manufacturers to benefit from Bangladesh's export advantages and tariff differentials while retaining significant industrial involvement. The expansion also creates opportunities to cultivate local business and political relationships. In Pakistan, however, the engagement model was characterised by closer interaction with the military establishment. CPEC, despite implementation difficulties, was noted to have shifted towards agriculture and food exports, alongside investments in fertiliser production and other sectors. Developments such as the digitisation of land records in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir were also discussed in the context of China's evolving engagement with local administrative structures. These examples highlighted the adaptability of Chinese economic diplomacy to different political and institutional environments.

A broader examination of China's development diplomacy followed, emphasising that Beijing does not necessarily distinguish between development assistance, infrastructure connectivity, industrial cooperation and capacity building. Between 2000 and 2023, Chinese development fina-

nce to five South Asian countries reportedly exceeded US$128 billion, with Pakistan and Bangladesh emerging as the largest recipients. Rather than adopting the conventional donor-recipient framework associated with Western development assistance, China presents its engagement through the language of international development cooperation and South-South Cooperation. This approach emphasises reciprocity, mutual benefit and partnership, while simultaneously advancing China's diplomatic and strategic interests. Infrastructure, technology and financial assistance are exchanged for market access, political cooperation and support within international institutions. Nevertheless, the discussion cautioned against viewing recipient countries as passive participants, highlighting their capacity to negotiate project terms, financial arrangements and the nature of their engagement with Beijing.

The strategic implications of China's infrastructure and technological expansion were further examined through developments in Tibet, Pakistan, Bhutan and Myanmar. Particular attention was drawn to the construction of large hydropower projects, transportation networks and strategic roads across Tibet, which were presented as part of China's broader efforts to strengthen border infrastructure and security mobilisation. The G219 highway and associated connectivity projects were discussed in relation to their proximity to contested territories along the India-China border. Concerns were also raised regarding Chinese-built settlements in Bhutan and the implications of ongoing boundary negotiations. In Pakistan, the availability of Chinese commercial satellite imagery covering sensitive areas following the Pahalgam terrorist attack was highlighted as an indication of the security dimensions of Sino-Pakistani cooperation. Meanwhile, infrastructure developments in the Coco Islands, including runway expansion and port facilities, were discussed in the context of China's growing presence in Myanmar and the eastern Indian Ocean.

The conversation then moved towards identifying the underlying motivations driving China's engagement with South Asia. Several interconnected considerations emerged, including the security of Tibet and Xinjiang, access to the Indian Ocean, the Malacca dilemma, economic opportunities and competition for influence within the Global South. The importance of Nepal, Bhutan and India in relation to Tibet, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan in managing security concerns surrounding Xinjiang, was emphasised. Bangladesh's geographical position and its connections with Myanmar also make it relevant to China's broader neighbourhood security calculations. Maritime access emerged as another major consideration, with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka offering potential avenues for strengthening China's connectivity with the Indian Ocean and securing vital sea lines of communication. However, the reliability of alternative routes such as CPEC and Gwadar remains uncertain given Pakistan's internal instability and security challenges.

Finally, the discussion considered China's changing international identity and the challenges associated with its growing influence in the Global South. Although Beijing continues to present itself as a developing country and advocate of South-South cooperation, its expanding economic, technological and military capabilities increasingly distinguish it from other developing economies. Its growing strengths in green technology, renewable energy, batteries and artificial intelligence offer new avenues for expanding international partnerships and establishing technological standards. At the same time, competition with India for leadership and influence within the Global South adds another dimension to regional engagement. The exchange concluded by underscoring that China's involvement in South Asia cannot be explained through a singular objective of containing India. Rather, it reflects a combination of domestic security priorities, maritime ambitions, economic interests, technological competition and the pursuit of wider geopolitical influence.

ROUNDTABLE II

DOMESTIC IMPEDIMENTS TO CHINA'S SELF-STRENGTHENING

The second roundtable examined the domestic constraints confronting China's pursuit of self-strengthening (zìlì gēngshēng) amid intensifying geopolitical competition, technological transformation and growing emphasis on economic resilience. The discussion focused on how demographic pressures, institutional limitations, governance structures and economic imbalances could affect China's ability to achieve greater technological and industrial autonomy. A recurring theme was the tension between the leadership's ambition to mobilise national resources towards strategic objectives and the domestic conditions required to translate these ambitions into sustainable outcomes.

One key area of discussion was the relationship between demographic change and technological transformation. China's ageing population and declining fertility rates are creating pressure on its labour market and industrial structure, encouraging greater adoption of labour-saving technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and automation. Demographic changes are also likely to shape investment in healthcare, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and elderly care. However, this transition raises challenges relating to workforce reskilling, employment displacement and the financial costs of technological adaptation. Participants emphasised that industrial policy alone would not be sufficient; stronger social protection mechanisms, including pension systems, healthcare provision and unemployment support, would also be necessary.

The discussion also examined information asymmetry between central and local governments. Although the central leadership establishes national priorities, implementation depends considerably on local authorities and state-owned enterprises. Rigid performance targets can encourage local officials to prioritise measurable achievements over substantive progress, resulting in exaggerated reporting, distorted statistics and projects designed to demonstrate political performance. The unsuccessful Wuhan Hongxin Semiconductor project was cited as an example of how weak oversight and collusion between local governments and enterprises can lead to financial losses and inefficient resource allocation. Participants further noted that political and ideological controls may discourage officials, researchers and businesses from communicating failures openly, limiting the feedback required for effective policymaking and innovation. These challenges, while longstanding features of Chinese governance, may become more consequential under increasing political centralisation.

At the same time, China has developed mechanisms to manage some of these institutional limitations through state-supported competition and local experimentation. The electric vehicle industry illustrated how government subsidies can encourage firms to enter strategic sectors, with market competition subsequently determining which companies survive. While this approach has helped produce competitive enterprises, it has also contributed to excessive competition, resource wastage and market consolidation. The Hefei model, in which local governments directly support and finance strategically important enterprises, was another example of local intervention. These cases highlighted the potential benefits of state support, but also the risks of duplication, protectionism and the preservation of inefficient firms.

A related concern was the balance between state-led mobilisation and market dynamism. China's ability to direct resources towards strategic industries has supported advances in areas such as artificial intelligence, satellite navigation, space technology and advanced manufacturing. However, competition between local governments can result in duplicated investments and barriers to market entry. Allowing non-competitive enterprises to exit may improve efficiency but can also create unemployment and social pressures. Participants therefore highlighted the need for a more predictable business environment, stronger intellectual property protection, effective regulation bankruptcy procedures, allowing market competition and private investment to comp-

lement state-led industrial development.

Fiscal constraints further complicate the relationship between central direction and local implementation. Local governments are expected to fulfil extensive administrative and development responsibilities despite declining financial resources. The real estate slowdown has weakened an important source of local revenue, while the post-1994 fiscal arrangements have contributed to a mismatch between local responsibilities and available resources. Greater fiscal devolution was discussed as one possible response, although it would require a redistribution of financial and administrative authority that may be difficult to reconcile with increasing political centralisation.

The roundtable also considered the implications of political centralisation under Xi Jinping for policymaking and institutional accountability. The leadership's emphasis on national rejuvenation, technological advancement, poverty alleviation and anti-corruption was discussed in the context of strengthening the Communist Party's authority and political legitimacy. Taiwan's reunification was examined in relation to the national rejuvenation agenda and the symbolic significance of the People's Republic of China's centenary in 2049. Participants expressed differing views on the extent to which reunification constitutes a personal political objective for Xi. The discussion also touched upon the absence of a clearly identified successor and the implications of prolonged centralisation for institutional continuity. While concentrated authority may facilitate resource mobilisation, it also raises questions about policy feedback, accountability and leadership succession.

Another major theme was the relationship between China's domestic economic model and its external trade relations. China's expanding manufacturing capacity and competitiveness in sectors such as electric vehicles, infrastructure and green technologies have contributed to concerns about industrial overcapacity and trade imbalances. These concerns extend beyond developed economies, with developing countries also questioning whether the influx of competitively priced Chinese goods could constrain their own industrialisation prospects. China's limited absorption of imports from lower- and middle-income economies further complicates its economic engagement with the Global South.

Participants linked these concerns to the imbalance between domestic supply and demand. Although Chinese policymakers recognise the importance of strengthening consumption, industrial policy continues to prioritise production capacity and technological development. A shift towards stronger domestic demand would require difficult reforms, potentially including currency appreciation, reduced export incentives, lower import barriers and greater overseas manufacturing. However, such measures face domestic resistance because of their implications for employment, export competitiveness, capital flows and asset prices.

China's response to external concerns was discussed in terms of its efforts to present itself as an enabling global economic power through infrastructure financing, open-source artificial intelligence and green technology cooperation. However, participants questioned whether these initiatives would sufficiently address trading partners' concerns without corresponding adjustments to domestic consumption and import demand. China's pursuit of self-sufficiency also sits uneasily with the international production networks that contributed to its own industrialisation. Its continued presence in lower-end manufacturing could limit the opportunities available to other developing economies.

The discussion concluded by returning to the relationship between domestic governance, economic restructuring and China's capacity to adapt. Information asymmetry and central-local tensions remain persistent challenges, while political centralisation and increasingly ambitious industrial objectives may make them more difficult to address. Nevertheless, local experimentation and adjustments to international engagement indicate that institutional adaptability remains possible.

ROUNDTABLE III

TOWARDS 2027 AND BEYOND: EVALUATING CHINA'S NEXT PHASE OF MILITARY MODERNISATION

The third roundtable examined the trajectory of China's military modernisation as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) approaches its centenary in 2027. The discussion considered the significance of 2027 as an important milestone in China's broader ambition to develop a world-class military by 2049, while also examining the technological, organisational and operational challenges that could shape the next phase of this transformation. A central theme was the distinction between acquiring advanced military capabilities and developing the ability to integrate them into an effective fighting force. While China has made considerable progress in expanding its military inventory, restructuring its armed forces and developing indigenous defence technologies, questions remain about the extent to which these capabilities can be translated into sustained operational effectiveness, particularly in a complex and contested environment.

China's military modernisation has broadly progressed through three stages which include mechanisation, informationisation and intelligentisation. Following the Gulf War in 1991, China recognised the limitations of its existing military capabilities and began prioritising high-technology warfare. This was followed by an emphasis on communication networks, surveillance systems and integrated command structures. The current phase places greater importance on artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, robotics and data-driven military operations. However, the transition towards intelligentisation does not imply that the preceding stages have been fully achieved, as gaps in mechanisation and informationisation continue to affect the PLA. The organisational reforms initiated in 2015, particularly the establishment of theatre commands, were intended to address some of these limitations by strengthening joint operations and improving coordination across the services. In this context, 2027 was viewed as an important benchmark rather than the culmination of military modernisation, with 2035 and 2049 serving as longer-term milestones in China's military ambitions.

The progress of modernisation is visible across the PLA's principal service branches and strategic capabilities. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has expanded its fleet of aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines and amphibious vessels, reflecting China's growing emphasis on maritime power. Similarly, the PLA Air Force has introduced advanced aircraft, including the J-20 stealth fighter, alongside developments in aerial refuelling and long-range operations. The Army is also moving towards smaller, more mobile and technologically sophisticated units. These developments have been accompanied by the diversification of conventional and nuclear missile capabilities, including road-mobile platforms, missile silos and submarine-based systems. The expansion of satellite infrastructure, together with developments in cyber operations, electronic warfare and counter-space capabilities, further reflects China's effort to strengthen its ability to operate across multiple domains.

Despite this expansion, the discussion highlighted that the possession of advanced platforms does not necessarily translate into effective military performance. The ability to coordinate land, air, maritime, space and cyber capabilities through integrated command-and-control systems remains a significant challenge. Although the theatre command reforms have provided an institutional foundation for joint operations, the extent to which they have produced effective coordination under realistic conditions remains uncertain. This challenge is compounded by the PLA's limited experience of actual combat. Having not participated in a major conventional conflict since the late 1970s, the military has had few opportunities to test its capabilities against a capable adversary. While exercises and simulations can improve preparedness, they cannot fully replicate the uncertainty and pressures of warfare. The concept of a 'peace disease' was raised in this context to describe the institutional and operational difficulties that may arise from prolonged periods without combat experience.

Technological self-reliance also remains an important part of this challenge. Despite progress in developing indigenous military platforms, limitations persist in areas such as aircraft engine reliability, propulsion systems and advanced submarine technologies. The development of reliable domestic systems is essential to reducing dependence on foreign technologies, but it also requires the capacity to test, maintain and continuously improve complex equipment. These concerns extend to China's expanding maritime presence. Sustaining prolonged PLAN operations beyond its immediate region requires effective logistical support, replenishment facilities, maintenance capabilities and access to overseas bases. There are uncertainties about PLAN's undersea warfare capabilities. China's anti-piracy deployments in the Indian Ocean have provided some experience in long-distance operations, but these missions differ considerably from the demands of a major maritime conflict.

These developments have important implications for the regional security environment, particularly in relation to China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities and a potential Taiwan contingency. Its growing inventory of long-range missiles, advanced aircraft, naval platforms and space-based surveillance systems could complicate the ability of external military powers to operate close to its coastline. Participants highlighted the considerable uncertainty surrounding a potential conflict over Taiwan, which could extend across multiple domains, including air, maritime, undersea and outer space. The possibility of escalation involving the United States and the potential damage to the Chinese mainland were among the factors discussed in assessing the consequences of military action. The Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia, including fishing fleets, were discussed as instruments through which China can maintain a presence and exert pressure in contested maritime spaces without initiating open military confrontation. Such activities have particular implications for smaller countries in the South China Sea, which face difficulties responding to actions that fall between routine maritime activity and conventional military engagement.

The changing role of Chinese aerospace power was considered alongside these wider developments. The PLA Air Force has gradually moved beyond its earlier emphasis on territorial defence towards supporting maritime operations and extending China's regional military influence. Advanced aircraft, surveillance systems and long-range strike capabilities have strengthened its ability to support naval operations and influence the airspace above surrounding maritime areas. Military aircraft activity around Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and the South China Sea also contributes to China's broader regional signalling. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these capabilities in an actual conflict remains difficult to assess in the absence of recent combat experience. The discussion also revealed that the PLAAF had kept its air power development in Tibet on the backburner, but has since accelerated its development by upgrading and building airfields, hardened aircraft shelters, weapon storage areas and logistic facilities. It has also expanded seasonal air power with assets like J-10, J-11, J-16, J-20, AWACS, and CH-5 & CH-7 HALE UAVs.

The discussion considered the institutional challenges associated with corruption investigations and personnel changes within the PLA. The removal and investigation of senior military officials have raised questions about procurement integrity, command continuity and institutional confidence. While anti-corruption measures may address weaknesses within the military establishment, personnel disruptions could also affect command structures and ongoing reforms. At the same time, the increasing incorporation of artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and advanced information networks requires corresponding improvements in professional military education, technical expertise and human-machine integration.

Overall, the roundtable highlighted that the PLA's next phase of modernisation will depend not simply on expanding its military inventory, but on its ability to integrate capabilities, sustain operations and demonstrate effectiveness under combat conditions. While 2027 provides an important benchmark for assessing progress, technological limitations, organisational challenges and the absence of recent combat experience remain important considerations in evaluating China's longer-term military ambitions.

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TEAM ORCA AT GCNS 2026 (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT): AFRIDI AHMED, NEHA MAURYA, CHITRA NAIR, RATISH MEHTA, OPHELIA YUMLEMBAM, EERISHIKA PANKAJ, OMKAR BHOLE, RAHUL K. REDDY & ARUSHI SHARMA

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 elite party politics and China's foreign policy, Rahul specialises in data-driven research like dashboards, infographics and reports. He is the Director of ORCA Consultancy, and has built dashboards on trade, provincial development, diplomacy & conducted field research on India & China in Nepal. His work has been published in The Diplomat, East Asia Forum, ISDP, 9Dash Line and several other platforms. He is the author of "Islands on the Rocks".

OMKAR BHOLE (SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AND CO-CONVENOR)

A postgraduate in China Studies with fluency in Chinese language, Omkar focuses on China's domestic economy, elite politics, India-China economic relations and China's foreign policy in South Asia. He has co-edited a Special Issue on India's Soft Power in South Asia at ORCA and conducted a public opinion survey in Nepal. He has contributed op-eds and commenatries at East Asia Forum, Asia Times, 9Dashline, ISDP and The Diplomat among others.

OPHELIA YUMLEMBAM (RESEARCH ASSOCIATE & CO-CONVENOR)

With a keen interest in China's engagement with Southeast Asia and India's role in the region, Ophelia writes on China-Southeast Asia relations, India's engagement with ASEAN, and the evolving dynamics of China-India relations in the region. Her research focuses on India's Act East Policy, China-Myanmar relations and China's influence in and around India's Northeast region.

RATISH MEHTA (SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AND CO-CONVENOR)

Specialising in deconstructing political narratives and India's foreign policy in the Global South and South Asia, Ratish was a Senior Research Associate at ORCA and is the author of the Special report on "Chinese Democracy in Theory and Practice".

CHITRA NAIR (RESEARCH ASSOCIATE)

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AFRIDI AHMED (FORMER ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT AND JUNIOR RESEARCHER)

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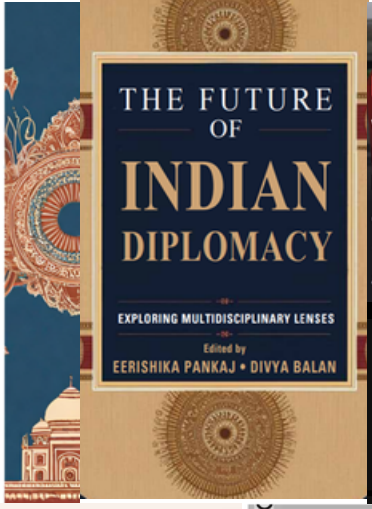
ORCA
ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON CHINA AND ASIA
INDIA'S SOFT PUSH FOR POWER IN SOUTH ASIA
SHAPING A FAVOURABLE TOMORROW
AN ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON CHINA AND ASIA (ORCA) PUBLICATION
CO-EDITED BY:
OMKAR BHOLE AND RATISH MEHTA
ORCA SPECIAL ISSUE 4


THE FUTURE OF INDIAN DIPLOMACY
EXPLORING MULTIDISCIPLINARY LENSES
Edited by
EERISHIKA PANKAJ • DIVYA BALAN


Backgrounders
WHOLE-PROCESS PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY
China's Alternative Governance Model
Ratish Mehta
August 22, 2025


The ORCA files
EP 01: Richard Bitzinger on China's Military Industrial Complex, Modernization Program and Evolving Civil-Military Relations


Events
09
March 2025
Mastering Data Visualization and Analysis for Academic and Professional Success
Online Workshop 1.0


BRI'S STRATEGIC CORRIDORS
Chinese Infrastructure as Leverage in Peru


BALANCING THE HIMALAYAN NEIGHBOURS: UNPACKING NEPAL'S PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF INDIA AND CHINA

Risk Analysis
Risk & Scenario Analysis
Strategic Advisory
Intelligence & Monitoring


19th
CENTRAL COMMITTEE
PART - 2


CHINA
Provinces Dashboard


Episodes of India-China E
Modern Bridges and Resonai


Section
Chapter (HS-2)
Heading (HS-4)
Commodity (HS-4)
Sub-Heading (HS-6)
Import/Export Intensity Index
0.9562
Share of Total Imports/Exports (%)
15.43
Annual Imports and Exports
Annual Trade Deficit/Surplus

EPISODES OF INDIA-CHINA EXCHANGES
MODERN BRIDGES AND RESONANT CONNECTIONS

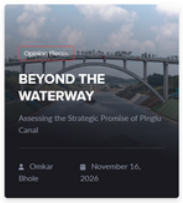

CHINA
Census Dashboard
A Comparative Visualisation of China's Censuses in 2000, 2010 and 2020
Explore Dashboard

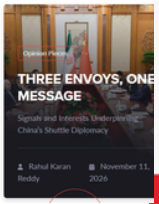
ORCA SPECIAL REPORT 1


अकेलेपन की अर्थव्यवस्था
पीएमी संस्कृति में सामाजिक मेलजोल महसूस कराता है अकेलापन


CICM
CICM 20th November 2026
CICM 19th November 2026


Opinion Pieces
PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP CHANGES IN CENTRAL AND WESTERN CHINA
Old Faces, New Trajectories
Neha Maurya
November 23, 2026


Opinion Pieces
BEYOND THE WATERWAY
Assessing the Strategic Promise of Pingtu Canal
Omkar Bhole
November 16, 2026


Opinion Pieces
THREE ENVOYS, ONE MESSAGE
Signals and Interests Underpinning China's Shuttle Diplomacy
Rahul Karan Reddy
November 11, 2026

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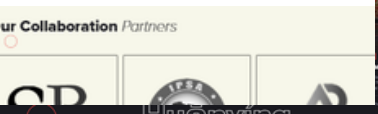
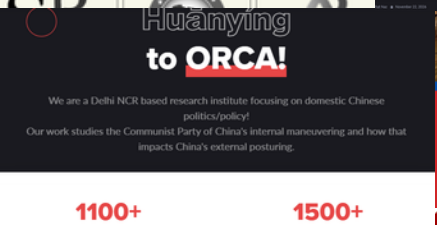
THE 'PRINCE' AND ALL HIS MEN
PREDICTING PERSONNEL CHANGES IN THE 20TH NPC
PREPARED BY
RAHUL KARAN REDDY
Research Associate, ORCA
SEPTEMBER 2022


ur Collaboration Partners


INDIA'S KALADAN CONUNDRUM




GDP of Chinese Provinces in 2022 (in Billion USD)


Huanying to ORCA!
We are a Delhi NCR based research institute focusing on domestic Chinese politics/policy!
Our work studies the Communist Party of China's internal maneuvering and how that impacts China's external posturing.
1100+
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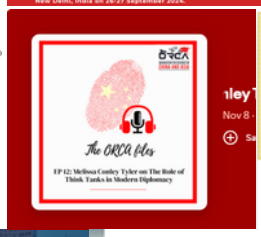
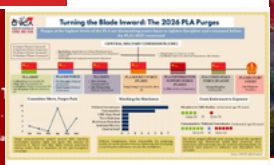
Ranging from op-eds to issue briefs, special reports and more by our Community of senior and junior Scholars
1500+
Daily CiCM Newsletters
Subscribers every evening receive crisp insights divided into sections: China's social media, regional news and an India Watch
205
Countries Reached
Within an year of inception, ORCA began being accessed and read across continents with consistent readership that has only grown over time

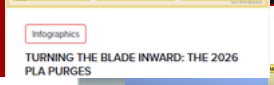

CONFERENCE REPORT
GCNS 2024
ORCA's second GCNS report brings together the ideas, recommendations and assessments of over 50 leading Sinologists from India and the world presented during the deliberations held in New Delhi, India on 26-27 September 2024.

GCNS CONFERENCE REPORT 2023

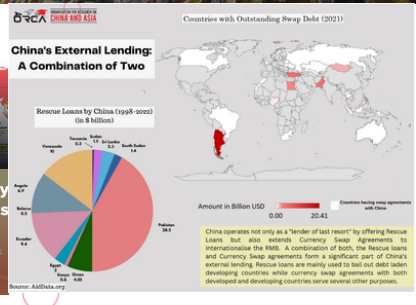

THE DALAI LAMA'S SUCCESSION
Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question
Eerishika Pankaj
Dr. Jagannath Panda
May 16, 2023
Special Issues


The ORCA files
EP 02: Melissa Conley Tyler on The Role of Think Tanks in Modern Diplomacy

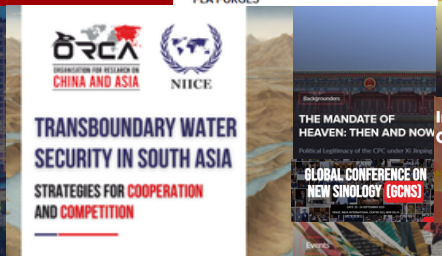

Turning the Blade Inward: The 2026 PLA Purges


Infographics
TURNING THE BLADE INWARD: THE 2026 PLA PURGES


Mapping China
KEY CHINESE MINING INVESTMENTS
WHY ARE BRI PROJECTS CANCELLED?


China's External Lending: A Combination of Two
Countries with Outstanding Swap Debt (2021)
Rescue Loans by China (1998-2025) (in $ billion)
Amount in Billion USD
China operates not only as a "lender of last resort" by offering Rescue Loans but also extends Currency Swap Agreements to internationalise the RMB. A combination of both, the Rescue loans and Currency Swap agreements form a significant part of China's external lending. Rescue loans are mainly used to bail out debt laden developing countries while currency swap agreements with both developed and developing countries serve several other purposes.


CHINA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DASHBOARD
An interactive dashboard that visualises China's diplomatic outreach in Asia from 2006 to 2017
Explore Dashboard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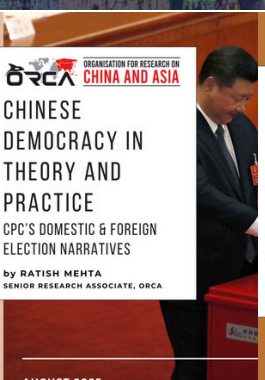
NIICE
TRANSBOUNDARY WATER SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA
STRATEGIES FOR COOPERATION AND COMPETITION
AN ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON CHINA AND ASIA (ORCA) CO-PUBLICATION WITH NEPAL INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ENGAGEMENT (NICE)
EDITED BY:
RAHUL KARAN REDDY
ORCA SPECIAL ISSUE 3

THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN: THEN AND NOW
GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON NEW SINOLOGY (GCNS)


Implications of the 20th Party Congress: Economics, Politics and Foreign Policy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CHINESE DEMOCRACY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE
CPC'S DOMESTIC & FOREIGN ELECTION NARRATIVES
by RATISH MEHTA
SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, ORCA

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DECODING TEN YEARS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION DATA IN CHINA
PATTERNS OF INVESTIGATIONS & PUNISHMENTS
by RAHUL KARAN REDDY
SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, ORCA AND DIRECTOR, ORCA CONSULTANCY

Events
08
March 2025
A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CRAFTING AND DECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES IN THE REAL WORLD
Online Workshop 1.0

PILGRIMAGE, POLITICS AND SOVEREIGNTY
India, China and the return to Kailash
May 15, 2025
Dr. Anton Harder
INDIA'S WAR AGAINST TERROR NETWORKS IN PAKISTAN
The China Factor
May 7, 2025
Dr Sundaram Rajasimman
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CMC VICE CHAIRMAN GENERAL HE WEIDONG
April 23, 2025
Dr. Srikanth Kondapalli
TILL 21 OCTOBER 2024 BORDER AGREEMENT BETWEEN INDIA CHINA AND BEYOND
A Tale of Differing Expectations
THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES (SOEs)
From Market Reforms to Strategic Control
CHINA'S STRATEGIES FOR THE TROUBLED REAL ESTATE SECTOR
Policy Adjustments, Economic Risks, and Future Prospects

Reviewing Chinese Culture
07
February 2025
EXTERNAL: EERISHIKA PANKAJ SPEAKS ON THE GROWING ROLE OF MINILATERAL GROUPINGS IN SHAPING INDO-PACIFIC AT ORF'S 7TH THINK TANK FORUM
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January 2025
ORCA x NICE: INTERNAL DRIVERS OF CHINA'S ECONOMIC STRATEGY TOWARDS NEPAL BY OMKAR BHOLE

21st CENTURY MARITIME SILK ROAD: PORT INFRASTRUCTURE AS ITS