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CHINA IS IN THE FRAME

By

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization.

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This is a moment that calls for a China focus. As an old order frays under the weight of war, coercion and acutely challenged hegemonies, it's hard to ignore the worldly ways of present-day China.

China has not entered the world stage waving the ideological certainties of the Soviet Union, nor has it advanced through the military overreach and interventionism that came to define American primacy after the cold war. China's ascent has instead been marked by a more deliberate pattern: accumulate power at home, institutionalise influence abroad, secure trade and supply lines, prevent strategic encirclement and present development as the language through which legitimacy is earned. That does not make China altruistic; no major power is. But it does make China distinctive.

China has spent the last decade converting power into structure. It is backing political, economic, diplomatic and strategic influence with institutions that are meant to endure. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, is the most visible of these. By October 2023, more than 150 countries and over 30 international organisations had signed Belt and Road cooperation documents with China, and Beijing had established more than 20 specialised multilateral cooperation platforms under the BRI umbrella. The point here is not simply roads, railways, ports and pipelines. The point is architecture: a system of relationships, dependencies and incentives through which China embeds itself in the future of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and parts of Europe.

Pakistan knows this perhaps more than most countries, because CPEC is among the flagship illustrations of how China thinks strategically. CPEC was never only about transport links or energy projects. It was about geography leveraged: western China connected to the Arabian Sea, Pakistan repositioned as a node in continental and maritime commerce and a long-term Chinese stake established in the stability of a critical region.

China's institutional statecraft did not stop at the BRI. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank opened in January 2016 with 57 founding members. It has since grown to 111 approved members, is capitalised at \$100 billion, and says it has approved \$70 billion for over 360 projects. The AIIB signalled that China was no longer content merely to participate in global finance under Western-designed rules; it wanted to help write new ones. Yet even here, China did not build an exclusive or exclusionary bloc. The AIIB attracted countries across regions, including US allies, because the infrastructure gap in Asia and beyond was real and because Beijing had grasped something Washington often misses: countries respond to delivery. Then there is the Silk Road Fund, announced in 2014 with an initial commitment of \$40 billion and formally established in Beijing on December 29, 2014. Unlike a slogan, a fund can finance ports, grids, logistics, industrial parks and long-horizon investments. And that is the larger point. China's rise has not rested on rhetoric alone.

China's mediation dimension has increasingly gained traction. For example, in March 2023, China helped broker the breakthrough restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In July 2024, Beijing hosted reconciliation talks among 14 Palestinian factions, culminating in the Beijing Declaration. China has also continued trilateral engagement with Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in recent days has been publicly identified as mediating the latest round of Pakistan-Afghanistan talks in Urumqi. Similarly, China is in the midst of resolving with Pakistan the most explosive multination war in the last century.

China's diplomatic evolution is now being institutionalised. On May 30, 2025, a convention establishing the International Organization for Mediation was signed in Hong Kong. According to official statements, it is the first intergovernmental international legal organisation devoted specifically to mediation in resolving international disputes. That means China is attempting to build not only projects and platforms, but also norms and venues through which disputes may be addressed outside the old coercive templates of sanctions, invasion and forced regime outcomes.

There is a deeper philosophy at work here. China does not see itself as 'a beacon on the hill' or the keeper of superior values. Its ways are subtle and language more restrained. But behind that restraint

lies a coherent thought process and actions: development first, connectivity next, security as precondition, sovereignty as principle and human material advancement as the test of governance. The numbers within China illustrate this. The World Bank says China reduced the number of people living below the international poverty line by close to 800 million over four decades, accounting for close to three-quarters of the global reduction in extreme poverty over that period.

This is why China's global message resonates across much of the Global South. Beyond the national, China's reach is global. For example, more than 100 countries and international organisations have supported China's Global Development Initiative, and by late 2024, more than 80 countries had joined its Group of Friends at the UN. China says it has provided development assistance to over 160 countries. One may debate motive, but one cannot dismiss reach.

Nor is China absent from the defining technologies of the future. In clean energy supply chains, the International Energy Agency says China's share across key stages of solar panel manufacturing exceeds 80 per cent. The IEA also notes that China invested more than \$50 billion in new solar PV supply capacity and created more than 300,000 manufacturing jobs across the solar value chain since 2011. In artificial intelligence, UNCTAD reported in 2025 that the US and China together account for about 33 per cent of AI publications and 60 per cent of AI patents.

None of this means China is without hard interests. It is deeply protective of what it sees as its near-abroad, whether in the South China Sea, Taiwan or the security of its continental approaches. It wants secure trade routes, reliable access to resources, insulation against strategic vulnerability and political space free of encirclement. But that is precisely the point: China's external behaviour, however assertive in its own perceived sphere, has not thus far resembled a project of overseas conquest or military remaking of distant societies.

At a moment when the old powers appear trapped between militarism abroad and political fatigue and chaos at home, China offers something different: not naivete, nor cantankerous combative rhetoric, nor innocence, but a competing power play-out from which different grammar and structures flow. China's international influence has been built through institutions, delivery and a patient sobriety in its exercise of power. That is why, for many societies battered by war and weary of double standards, China's approach appears not perfect but interesting – and perhaps hopeful.

Clearly, in a world where fragile and partisan structures are clashing and crumbling, instant substitutes delivering justice cannot be available. China's ways are inevitably in focus as global frustration mounts in the sea of conflict, chaos, inadequacies and a diabolical genocide. In a world searching for alternatives to this chaos, China remains in the frame.



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