

China and the “Asia-Pacific Century” in International Politics: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article examines key issues concerning China’s rise to great-power status in the 2000s and its implications for the International Relations discipline. The existing IR scholarship deals with questions concerning the nature of the Sino-US power transition, whether this rivalry constitutes a new type of Cold War, or whether it will eventually lead to open warfare between China and the US. Other points of discussion include the relevance of the China Model across different parts of the world and its potential role in authoritarian diffusion. China’s rise also requires an examination of the country’s economic impact abroad, and particularly in the Global South. While the Western world, by and large, considers China’s rise a threat, developing countries tend to view it as an opportunity. Nevertheless, China’s trade and investment ties to Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia have far more complex outcomes than the generic titles “mutual gain” or “debt trap” suggest.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, US, China, Trump, Xi Jinping

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Introduction

In September 2025, a worldwide media frenzy sparked over the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), hosted by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the city of Tianjin. This event gathered SCO member states and representatives from several developing countries, underscoring the organization’s rising popularity in the Global South (Jie 2025). A particularly noteworthy instance was the cordial handshake between China’s Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as these leaders are rarely seen together amid ongoing tensions between their countries (Pandey and Mcdonell 2025). The following day, an even greater media spectacle gathered in Beijing to observe China’s commemoration of its Second World War victory with a gigantic military parade. Photos of Xi Jinping standing next to the Russian leader Vladimir Putin and North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, alongside the display of China’s newest weaponry, sent symbolic shockwaves around the world, as many perceived the occasion to be a direct challenge to the United States (US) hegemony and its rules-based international order (Gan et al. 2025; Davidson 2025).

China's rise to great power status is undoubtedly one of the most profound dynamics reshaping the 21st century. As of 2026, China is the world's second-largest economy after the US in nominal gross domestic product (GDP) and the biggest one in terms of purchasing power parity (Cohen 2026). China's share of global GDP has grown significantly over the last few decades, from representing a little more than 2 % of the global output (PPP) in 1980 to almost 20 % in 2025 (Statista 2025). This huge change owes to the reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifeng*) process undertaken by Deng Xiaoping, a veteran of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who came to power two years after Chairman Mao Zedong died in 1976. Throughout the 1980s, Deng's reforms aimed at removing the ideological excesses of the Mao era from China's legal, educational, and military institutions while modernizing the country's economic infrastructure.

Deng's market reforms boosted production at home and opened China to outside influences, without touching the country's political establishment. The CCP is one of the few communist parties that remained in power following the grand transformations that shook Europe and Asia by the end of the Cold War. All hopes regarding a democratic transition in China faded after the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, when thousands of young protestors in Beijing were attacked by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on the CCP's orders. Throughout the 1990s, as the Chinese economy grew at double-digit rates, reforms began to have serious consequences at home, including environmental degradation and income inequality. China's next-generation leaders, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, would address those problems during their presidential tenure.

Although China's economic rise has become a globally acknowledged fact after the country's membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001, Beijing remained loyal to Deng Xiaoping's motto of "hiding your strength and biding your time" in its national foreign policy. In order to counter the "China threat" discourse abroad, the CCP leadership even came up with new terms like "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) and "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan*) to convince the world of the country's benign intentions (Zheng 2005; Buzan 2014; Glaser and Medeiros 2007). Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 would create a rupture in Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics.

The Xi Jinping era is a unique combination of authoritarian rule at home and an assertive foreign policy abroad (Economy 2018). During Xi's term, Chinese "grand strategy" evolved from a defensive posture to a more proactive approach to realizing the country's "dream of national rejuvenation" (Goldstein 2020). To this purpose, President Xi launched several ambitious projects, among them the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and "Made in China 2025" in 2015. The BRI, which initially aimed to modernize transportation infrastructure across the Eurasian landscape, became a global initiative in a little more than a decade, with more than 150 countries subscribing to the initiative today (Ulubel 2025). It is often viewed as a massive geopolitical undertaking capable of reshaping global logistics, transportation, and energy infrastructure (World Bank 2019; Garlick 2020; Callahan 2016; Liu and Dunford 2016).

According to many, President Xi is holding an unrivaled position within the CCP, reminiscent of charismatic leaders before him, such as Chairman Mao (Campbell 2017; Tsoi and Chang 2022). He was able to amend the Chinese constitution in 2018, removing the presidential term limit and effectively turning himself into a lifetime leader. While Western-style democracy is still considered a heretic idea in China, the CCP promotes a complex blend of Confucianist values, modern nationalism, and socialist principles. The collective memories regarding the Opium Wars fought against European powers in the 19th century (Wang 2014; Ning 2013), the anti-Japanese struggle of the 1930s and 40s (Reilly 2014), and the anti-American sentiment of the Cold War years constitute the founding blocs of Chinese nationalism today.

The Xi era is also known for China’s growing military posture in the South China Sea and the scenarios of forceful reunification with Taiwan, which also triggers political tension with the US. Washington’s discontent with Beijing grew exponentially since 2018, when the first Trump administration launched a trade war against China. In 2019, President Trump’s espionage charges against the Chinese tech giant Huawei and accusations against Beijing over the COVID pandemic, which allegedly started in the Chinese city of Wuhan, fueled these hostilities further. Today’s White House continues to devise policies to defuse the “China threat” and prevent the Asian juggernaut from becoming the next global hegemon. Although there is no scholarly consensus on whether this rivalry constitutes a “Second Cold War” (Christensen 2021), the comprehensive nature of Sino-US tensions has led many to conclude that the world is returning to a bipolar power structure (Zhao 2022; Maher 2018; Yan 2020). This perspective is particularly strong in the realm of technology, where China and the US lead the innovation race in artificial intelligence, robotics, and quantum computing (Schindler et al. 2024). Not surprisingly, scholarly terms describing the antagonism between Beijing and Washington, such as “Tech Cold War” (Baums and Butts 2025) or “Sputnik moment” (Xu 2025), are reminiscent of the past geopolitical rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union.

While China currently remains the focal point of the “Asia-Pacific century”, this region also hosts other advanced economies and middle powers that deserve attention. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, for instance, lie at the center of East Asia’s complex security dynamic, which has assigned a prominent role to the US at least since the Cold War. Washington’s bilateral security commitments to its Asia-Pacific allies have historically become a major problem for America’s geopolitical rivals in the region, such as China, Russia, and North Korea. More recently, India emerged as a potential balancer vis-à-vis China in the eyes of Western countries. Invented by the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Katagiri 2020), the term “Indo-Pacific” is a geopolitical concept that emphasizes India’s growth trajectory in Asia, both demographically and economically. Embraced by Washington, Brussels, and Tokyo today, the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” encourages military cooperation schemes between India, Japan, Australia, and the US, such as the Quad. Now, let us turn to examine the big scholarly questions on China’s rise and the Asia-Pacific century in the International Relations (IR) discipline, which also constitute some of the main themes of this special issue.

Major Questions on China's Rise and the "Asia-Pacific Century"

A number of difficult questions concerning China's rise have kept scholars, journalists, and diplomats busy since the 1990s. Inquiries into the nature of the Sino-US power transition are among the most well-known of these questions. While there is no consensus over the phenomenon of "American decline" within academia, recently coined terms such as "Post-American world" (Zakaria 2008), "Post-Western World" (Stuenkel 2016), or "Easternization" (Rachman 2017) point new scholarly discussions toward this direction. A series of incidents in the 21st century, including the 9/11 attacks, Snowden revelations, the 2008 financial crisis, and the humiliating US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, reinforced the conviction that Pax-Americana is over. Likewise, recent public opinion surveys conducted in the US show bipartisan belief that China may soon surpass the US in every critical domain (Chivvis, Wertheim, and Schmitter-Emerson 2026). Although China's rise is constrained today by its aging population and slowing economic growth, many observers continue to view the country as the most likely challenge to the US in the military, economic, and technological domains. In the White House, this perspective was initially embraced by President Barack Obama, whose "Asia Pivot" in 2011 was a gentle prelude to the harsher anti-China policies undertaken by the Trump and Biden administrations years later.

Several IR scholars have analyzed the nature and possible consequences of the American-Chinese power transition over the years. Perhaps the most well-known analogy in this sense is Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap". Based on historical precedent, Allison (2017) argues that China and the US are trapped in a rivalry dynamic that may lead to actual war in the coming years. John Mearsheimer (2010; 2014; 2021), a prominent representative of offensive realism, is even more certain of this pessimistic outlook in his various publications on great-power dynamics between China and the US. Conversely, some scholars find China more dangerous not because the country continues to grow, but precisely because its economic growth is slowing. Running out of time to pose a real challenge to the US, therefore, China has more incentive to engage in a war against it (Brands and Beckley 2021; Beckley and Brands 2022).

Questions on the likelihood of a Sino-US war are also occupying the minds of Chinese scholars at the other end of the Pacific Ocean. Realist-minded thinkers like Wang Jisi (2024) acknowledge the dramatic downturn in bilateral relations, although he doesn't necessarily see a military conflict on the horizon. Others like Yan Xuetong (2010) view nuclear arms on both sides as an important barrier to an all-out war between China and the US. For those who predict a Sino-US military conflict, however, Taiwan appears to be the most likely catalyst. Xi Jinping is outspoken on China's objective to reunify Taiwan with the mainland -by force if necessary (BBC 2019). But Taiwan has remained a *de facto* independent state since 1949, and Washington is firmly opposed to an invasion scenario. While the US discourages Taiwanese leaders from declaring *de jure* independence, even symbolic signs from Taipei in this direction

result in China’s naval quarantines and missile strikes over the Taiwan Straits, rendering the island’s political future a thorny issue between China and the US.

Another important question on China’s rise concerns the universality of its economic and political model. While the Chinese miracle owes much to free-market dynamics, the country’s economic model remains distinct from neoliberalism, as Beijing has never adopted International Monetary Fund (IMF) prescriptions such as a floating exchange rate or the full liberalization of its capital markets. More importantly, following the 2008 global financial crisis, which raised concerns over the future of the neoliberal model, China’s dedication to state planning and government incentives drew growing scholarly interest abroad. New terms such as “Beijing Consensus” (Ramo 2004) entered Western intellectual debates at this time. There were also more dramatic projections on how China will “rule the world” (Jacques 2009), alongside praise for Chinese “illiberalism” for prioritizing social stability over individual rights (Vukovich 2019) or placing meritocracy over democratic norms (Bell 2015).

The debate over the “China Model” continues to this day, with some scholars highlighting its limitations (Zhao 2010) and others arguing for its partial feasibility in specific circumstances (Ang 2018). Despite questions on its universal applicability, it is clear that the Chinese model is resonating most strongly in Global South countries. China’s relatively positive image in the developing world partly stems from discontent with American hegemony in the 21st century, particularly the US military interventions abroad. By contrast, Beijing’s non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs reinforces China’s perception as a benign power. Although China’s first military base in Djibouti has sparked significant controversy in recent years, the country has not seemed eager to expand its international network of air and naval bases since 2017.

Nevertheless, the Chinese army is second only to the US in budgetary terms, and the world’s biggest in terms of manpower. PLA is also a major actor in shaping China’s national security strategy (Saunders and Scobell 2015) and foreign policy (Ji 2014). Still, Chinese leadership shied away from using its military muscle in recent conflicts, including Libya, Afghanistan, and Syria, although Beijing was notably upset with the way Western powers handled these crises. The same goes for the Venezuela debacle in January 2026 and the Israeli-US attack against Iran two months later. China’s reluctance to use its military force to safeguard its interests or to protect friendly regimes makes it harder for IR scholars to categorize the country as a revanchist power akin to Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany of the 1940s.

China may not be a revanchist power in the classical sense of the term, but it is certainly attempting to change the rules of the game in the 21st century. President Xi Jinping expresses China’s alternative worldview through his distinct foreign policy vocabulary, such as “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” (Nathan and Zhang 2021). Beijing also promises Global South countries a new kind of relationship, a win-win strategy which emphasizes the primacy of economic development and trade.

China's recent great power projection is also evident in its active participation in international organizations (Lanteigne 2005). Beijing contributes substantial funds to global governance organizations such as the United Nations, while emphasizing the importance of multilateral settings for resolving regional and global conflicts, in opposition to US unilateralism. But China's rise also prompts questioning of the existing norms and decision-making mechanisms within these institutions, for which the IMF and the World Bank serve as prominent examples (Wang and Sampson 2022). Beijing's dissatisfaction with the existing institutional mechanisms led to the establishment of several China-sponsored organizations in the 2000s, including the SCO, BRICS, and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These institutions are often portrayed in the Western media as rivals to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the IMF, or the World Bank. The recent expansion of SCO and BRICS showcases these organizations' growing appeal in developing countries, though they have yet to demonstrate their effectiveness in security and finance. While SCO was practically invisible in every regional or global crisis striking the Eurasian landscape since its foundation in 2001, BRICS' future objective of establishing a common currency as an alternative to the US Dollar remains unattainable as of 2026.

A related question is how China's rise would impact the economic trajectory of the Global South. The launch of the BRI in 2013 pushed Chinese companies to become actively involved in building modern transportation infrastructure throughout Eurasia, as well as in the Middle East and Africa (Zhang, Alon, and Lattemen 2018). Likewise, China has a growing role in mining and mineral extraction in Latin America, as well as cultivating land in Africa. While Western media often frames Chinese policies in the developing world as "neo-colonialism" or "new imperialism", Beijing insists on calling them mutually beneficial "win-win" practices. Chinese leadership also offers loans and other forms of development assistance to non-Western countries with "no strings attached" in the human rights field, opening up debates over China's role in authoritarian diffusion (Ambrosio 2010, 383). Although recent empirical studies do not substantiate the Chinese "debt trap" argument (Brautigam 2020), several countries in the South (e.g., Pakistan, Angola, Kenya) remain dangerously indebted to China. Therefore, China's role in economic development and growth in the Global South is difficult to generalize about and requires further study.

Last but not least, China's rise reshapes the Asia-Pacific region in many ways. Neighboring countries' threat perception of China leads them toward the prospect of armament and the formation of new military blocs. The Japanese government's desire to amend Article 9 of the country's constitution, which renounces the use of force to settle international disputes, is closely linked to China's rise over the last two decades. Likewise, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is prompting Vietnam and the Philippines to reconsider their geopolitical position vis-à-vis their giant neighbor and to approach the US for collaboration. Most other Southeast Asian countries opt for a hedging strategy to avoid being squeezed between China and the US in their emerging Cold War. Still, the maneuvering space for middle powers seems to be narrowing amid bipolarity.

Overview of the Special Issue

Uluslararası İlişkiler’s special issue on “China and the Asia-Pacific Century in International Politics” addresses many of the fundamental questions raised above regarding China’s rise and its global impact. The issue brings together 8 original articles to elaborate on these questions from an interdisciplinary angle.

Concerning the Chinese model’s relevance for the rest of the world, our special issue introduces Caice Jin’s (2026) article titled “Debating National Identity through the China Model: An Ideological Spectrum Analysis,” which scrutinizes the scholarly debate in China on the existence and replicability of the “China model” in a historical context. As Jin explains, the “China model” is a contested term that reflects the tension between the long processes of Sinification and Westernization in China. These contradictory trends have become the defining feature of modern Chinese history since the Qing Dynasty’s continuous defeats at the hands of European powers in the 19th century. Exploring the roots of the China model in this ideological and identity-based setting, Jin argues that some Chinese intellectuals trace its origins to the 1978 reform period, while others look back to the Maoist era (1949-1976) or even further to China’s imperial heritage. Not surprisingly, liberal, left-wing, and conservative Chinese scholars also have disagreements over the relevance and applicability of the Chinese model in other countries.

Whether one has faith in the “China model” or not, Beijing dedicates a huge budget and significant energy to expanding the country’s cultural appeal abroad. Chinese public diplomacy includes a range of activities stretching from educational exchange programs to sponsoring mega events for global audiences. Likewise, Confucius institutes and classrooms are instrumental in popularizing Mandarin in much of the world. Other soft power tools include the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and official Chinese newspapers in foreign languages, which craft Beijing’s alternative worldview on a daily basis. In our special issue, Haluk Karadağ (2026) explores how the Chinese navy -an unlikely actor in the country’s soft power toolbox- is also instrumental in extending China’s influence abroad. His piece “The United States-China Strategic Competition and Roots of Chinese ‘Harmonious Mission’ Military Public Diplomacy Strategy” focuses on the PLA’s goodwill missions since 2010 (Karadağ 2026). The adjective for China’s disaster relief operations, i.e., “harmonious,” is also a metaphor for the PRC regime’s larger emphasis on China’s Confucian heritage and the peaceful order it represents. Karadağ’s specific focus is the hospital ship “Peace Ark” (*Daishan Dao*), which conducted humanitarian activities from Africa to the Caribbean between 2010 and 2024. It is doubtful, of course, whether these “harmonious missions” can improve the standard PLA image in the Western media, which often focuses on the navy’s role in pushing Chinese territorial demands in the East and South China Seas.

Another major component of Chinese soft power is certainly the country’s economic might. Whereas commercial and financial vigor is usually categorized under the concept of “hard power”, China’s gigantic infrastructure projects, such as the BRI, seem to have

changed that definition. Largely viewed as a geopolitical scheme to divert the Atlantic-based global economy into a Pacific-centered one, BRI has greatly contributed to China's growing appeal in developing countries. Tony Tai Ting Liu's (2026) article, "Regionalism with Chinese Characteristics: The Belt and Road Initiative, New Narratives and Implications for International Order," evaluates this initiative within the theoretical paradigm of regionalism. Liu argues that because the BRI departs from conventional definitions of regionalism in several respects, it should be seen as a representative case of "third wave regionalism". BRI's identifying features, according to the author, are its interregional character, its promotion of cooperation across multiple realms, and its relatively diverse geographical scope. China's growing role in regional economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is also visible through the bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements Beijing has signed with its neighbors. Liu also points out that these China-sponsored endeavors are interwoven with new narratives, such as the "Community of Common Destiny", promoted by President Xi Jinping.

Southeast Asia constitutes one of the main destinations for outbound Chinese investments today. This region is also home to the world's oldest and most prosperous Chinese diaspora, which has historically served as the backbone of economic dynamism in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. One of the contributions to this volume, "When Repressed Civil Society Attracts Foreign Investors: The Dual Dimensions of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Southeast Asia," authored by Lin Sae-Phoo, Shaka Y.J. Li, and Raras Cahyafitri (2026), examines the role of domestic politics and the human rights situation in Southeast Asia on China's FDI decisions. Based on statistical evidence, the authors argue that Chinese investors particularly favor countries with political stability and abundant resources, where host governments are more likely to resort to repressive measures. The empirical evidence comes from Cambodia and Indonesia, which the authors chose as case studies to demonstrate that Chinese investment decisions are affected by both political repression and resource dependence in host countries. The larger implications of this study, of course, concern the long-term impact of China's "no strings attached" investment and loan policy in the Global South, as well as its disregard for labor rights abroad.

Whereas China's commercial and financial impact in Asia is monumental, hardly any location in the 21st century remains untouched by Chinese capital. The nature of Chinese economic influence in Africa and South America is often made subject to debate, with frequent accusations of "neo-colonialism" or "new imperialism" in Western media and scholarship. Our authors Hazal Melike Çoban and Carmen Fonseca (2026) tackle this hard question in their article titled "China's Growing Influence in Latin America: Navigating Geopolitical Rivalry and Economic Dependency". This article examines how China's growing economic ties with Latin America -a region which has long been considered the "US backyard"-reflect on the nexus of dependence and autonomy in the region. Based on trade and investment data from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico between 2000 and 2022, Çoban and Fonseca find that China's growing influence in Latin America "recalibrated, rather than eliminated dependence patterns". While China offers some room for maneuver to Latin American countries, the latter are still

constrained by structural aspects of underdevelopment. Since the capture of the Venezuelan president, Nicolas Maduro, one of China’s closest allies in the region, by US special forces in January 2026, more questions have arisen over the longevity of China’s political influence in Latin America.

China, of course, has its strongest partners in Eurasia, where its strategic interests are not constantly under attack from Washington. Russia remains China’s foremost ally, and Moscow serves as the top destination for President Xi Jinping’s official visits in the past decade. This “no limits” partnership grew stronger considering NATO’s Madrid Summit in 2022, when both countries were listed as systemic rivals to the organization in its most recent strategic concept document. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the same year, bilateral trade between China and Russia expanded, particularly in natural gas and oil. The energy aspect of this partnership is explored by our contributor, Anna Kireeva (2026), in her article “Russia-China Energy Cooperation after the Ukraine Crisis,” from an international political economy perspective. Kireeva argues that the groundwork for the Sino-Russian energy partnership can be traced back to a series of bilateral agreements signed since 2014. While the energy ties grew and diversified after the Ukraine crisis, which pressured Russia to reach customers beyond Europe, the existing bottlenecks in the energy infrastructure limit further expansion of the Chinese-Russian partnership. Such hurdles can only be removed by the signing of a large-scale project between Moscow and Beijing, which has not come to fruition due to market dynamics and different agendas pursued by Chinese and Russian corporations.

Our special issue also deals with other notable powers in the Asia-Pacific, such as Japan and South Korea. While these countries are geographically close to China, they remain aligned with the US for security reasons. Chinese-Japanese relations are intense due to historical memory (i.e., Japanese war crimes during the Second World War) but also because of contemporary dynamics, such as the rivalry in the economic and technological spheres. China has surpassed Japan as the world’s second-largest economy as early as 2010, and the overlapping territorial demands of both countries over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands add salt to the injury. Tokyo, however, cannot ignore Japan’s economic dependence on China, according to Kivilcim Erkan and Yoichiro Sato (2026). In their contribution to our special issue “Japan’s China Strategy: Cultivating Partnerships in the Global South as Part of the Hedging Strategy” (Erkan and Sato 2026), the authors argue that Japanese foreign policy under the Kishida government (2021-2024) constitutes a “hedging” strategy, through which Japan aims to counterweight its dependence on China by reaching out to the Global South. Erkan and Saito view Japan’s pivot to Global South countries as a strategy to diversify beyond China and portray Japan as an alternative donor and a geopolitical bridge between the West and the developing world. It remains to be seen, of course, whether Tokyo can achieve these goals during the second Trump administration, which has radically disrupted the status quo in Latin America and the Middle East.

South Korea is another middle power that pursues its own foreign policy goals amid China’s growing clout worldwide. Despite being a key American ally, Seoul shies away from taking a hostile stance against China in the emerging Sino-US Cold War. As in Japan, building

relations with Global South countries remains key to South Korea, which has a large toolkit at its disposal, from K-pop's global appeal to the high-tech engineering projects it brings to developing countries. Hatice Çelik, Joosong Lee, and Vuslat Nur Şahin Temel (2026) examine some of these tools in their article titled "New Regionalism Beyond Asia-Pacific: South Korea's Multidimensional Approach to the Eastern Mediterranean". Employing new regionalism theory and using Egypt and Turkey as case studies, the authors explore how South Korea pursues a multidimensional foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean region via economic, technological, and diplomatic means. South Korea focuses on functional and sector-specific cooperation, using free trade agreements and official development assistance as key tools to reach out to the East Mediterranean.

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