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## China's Rise as a Pole in a Multipolarizing World: An Overview of Its Evolving Diplomacy

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# China's Rise as a Pole in a Multipolarizing World

AN OVERVIEW OF ITS  
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Jenny Clegg

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## Abstract

China's rise to become a major player on the international stage is central to study of the world's multipolar trend. Whilst some predict a world divided in new Cold War-style blocs, China talks of a "shared future for humanity". However, China's own explanations of its intentions are obscured in vague and lofty language. This article seeks to demonstrate the value of a historical approach in clarifying the meanings of the claims to foster a more "inclusive multilateralism" and a "more just and rational world order". China has long seen its future lying together with the developing world confined within unequal structures of world economic and political power, and as a large developing country it has exercised greater capacity to leverage its position. Seeing China's rise as intertwined with the emergence of the Global South, this study highlights the importance for China of its relations with the developing countries, whilst similarly noting China's efforts to promote South-South cooperation. China's diplomacy has evolved step by step from prioritizing national survival to

focusing on economic development whilst maneuvering internationally to now take up a world-leading position. The discussion emphasizes the strategic continuities of uniting with the Global South and exploiting divisions within the Global North to suggest a frame of analysis for understanding China's international leadership. Appreciating China's relations with developing countries and its goal for a new-style international relations based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are still works in progress, some pointers for future investigation are suggested.

### **Keywords**

*China's diplomacy; Global South; inclusive multilateralism; multipolarity; South-South cooperation*

## **Introduction**

With the US in relative decline, the transition to a multipolar world lies at the core of a tumultuous world transformation. Amidst multiple crises, prolonged wars and economic and political instabilities, the so-called 'Western liberal international order' is unravelling and the search among countries of the Global South for alternative forms of global governance is intensifying.<sup>1</sup>

At this point in time, China has come forward with bold proposals, calling for a new-type international relations "based on the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, respect for each country's core interests and major concerns, and respect the peoples' and countries' independent choice of social systems and development paths" (Kewalramani, 2025; Zhao, 2025).

Without doubt, China has become a major actor on the international stage, with its rise having a profound impact on the multipolar process. But how is the emerging multipolarity to be

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1. Global South is a vaguely defined concept, still in the process of subjective definition. Following Desai (2021), this discussion uses the terms developing countries, Third World and Global South interchangeably. For some discussion of terminology see Marchand (1994, pp. 296-297).

understood? The influential political scientist, John Mearsheimer, sets out the world trend towards rival Yalta-style blocs, yet China's vision of a 'shared future for mankind' clearly obviates this view (Mearsheimer, 2001; Zhao, 2025).

There is a growing literature focusing on South-South cooperation as an alternative to the existing unequally structured international order (Amin, 2003, 2008; Desai, 2021; Gürcan, 2019; Heine et al., 2025; Marchand, 1994). A number of works identify China as a driving force in this trend (Artner, 2022; Clegg, 2009; Murphy, 2022). Yet China's foreign policy pronouncements are broad and vague (Zhang, 2018): how then are its claims to be 'working to promote the development of the international order in a more just and rational direction' to be assessed (AFP, 2022)? Its international role is not uncontroversial and maintaining a critical perspective is vital. But often legitimate concerns are amplified to sow doubts as to China's geopolitical ambitions.

Losurdo's identification of the weakness of Western (Marxist) critical theory in relation to socialist countries like China, is apt: rather than engaging with the 'difficult and drawn out process' of building socialism, they measure up actual practices against 'imagined standards of theoretical or moral purity' (Losurdo, 2024, pp.257-263). This article, following Losurdo, offers a historically grounded reflection on the arduous process as, against the odds, China set about restoring its stature as a major world power, transforming from an isolated revolutionary state in 1949, one of the largest and poorest nations in the world, into a major economic power and an active participant in the international system. This examination is set within the frame of the unevenly developing relations between the Global North and Global South.

Sharing a common past of imperialist domination, China identifies as a developing country, seeing its future as lying together with the developing world in the collective struggle for independence and an equitable world order. China's per capita income, it is worth noting, is below that of Latin America (Heine, et al., 2025, p.151). At the same time, China has never joined nor sought to join the major groupings of the Global South: it remains an observer at the

G77 and has only an association with the Non-Aligned Movement. As the largest developing country, it stands out given its greater capacity to leverage its interests both in terms of its economic capacities in trade and investment and its overall global influence not least as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Today, in the midst of major global transformations - in technologies, in energy generation as well as in world order and governance - China exercises considerable negotiating power.

How does China conceive the multipolar trend and how does it see its role as an actor in the process? How has China leveraged its rise given the constraints of unequal world economic and political power? To what extent do China's national interests and the interests of the Global South correspond? How is China responding to the US challenge with its increasing unpredictability stoking greater global instabilities and divisions? Discussion of these questions is clearly essential to understanding the emergence of multipolarity, its nature and its future.

Putting the spotlight on China's role as a political actor, this discussion sets its rise in the context of the transformation of the world as a whole from one dominated by post-war imperialist containment of radical anti-colonialism to one driven to the brink of a new multilateral inclusive governance through the rise of the Global South. Whilst relations with Global South have grown in importance for China particularly over the last two decades, their foundation is to be traced back to the Bandung Conference of 1955 and China's support for national struggles against oppression. Searching itself for a peaceful external environment in which to pursue its own development, China's trajectory over the decades has been intertwined with that of the emerging Global South. This discussion aims to highlight the importance for China, in the advance of its international stature, of its relations with the developing world, tracing its agenda for peace and development based on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FPPC) amidst the shifting international context.

China's diplomacy has evolved from securing national survival under Mao to the shift to economic development maneuvering into

position through quiet diplomacy in the Dengist period, to now stepping forward as a major international actor under Xi Jinping's presidency. This historical overview of the process traces the methods, policies and strategies China has used in pursuit of goals to leverage its position, managing the constraints, challenges and opportunities presented within the regional and international environment. Drawing lessons from the past, the discussion returns to the opening questions and themes to offer some considerations as well as suggestions for further investigation following through the analysis presented.

## The Historical Evolution of China's Diplomacy from 1949

### *The PRC Amidst the Surging Struggles for National Liberation*

The establishment of the people's democratic state in October 1949 saw China set a course towards independence, prosperity and the restoration of the nation's international stature. The defeat of imperialism - first with the ending the Japanese occupation in 1945, and then with the defeat by the CPC armies of the US-backed Nationalist forces in the civil war - had however been enormously costly in lives, of both soldiers and civilians, leaving the economy devastated and impoverished.

Mao, recognizing a compromise was necessary, 'leaned to the side' of the Soviet Union for assistance not least for security. China faced the immediate challenge of the state's survival: the civil war remained unresolved and with the US backing the Nationalist regime in Taiwan, reunification was beyond reach. US refusal to recognize the new state's legitimacy made it a target of direct attack, potentially on a massive scale as US troops amassed across East and Southeast Asia to turn back the spreading tides of revolution.

As the Korean war broke out in 1950, China was isolated internationally and placed under economic embargo. However, by 1953, Chinese volunteers and the Korean People's Army had succeeded in fighting the US-led UN forces to a standstill; the Vietminh followed

soon after with victory at Dien Bien Phu. The US and European powers were driven to the negotiating table.

The 1954 Geneva conferences saw the PRC make its first ever international appearance. Detecting divisions between the weakening France and Britain on the one hand, and the US, China's foreign minister Zhou Enlai succeeded in achieving a temporary settlement for both Korea and Vietnam (Grey, 1990, p.321; Li Wang, 1994, pp.48-9). On visits with Nehru in India and U Nu in Burma during the Geneva proceedings, Zhou managed to secure China's borders further with agreement on the FPPC: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and co-operation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. These steps set back US plans for its military to fill the vacuum created by the decline of European colonialism. The easing of regional tensions and the development of friendly relations between the three Asian powers, even if short-lived, created an opening for the historic Bandung Conference of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements and governments to be convened in 1955.

From the outset in 1949, the PRC had committed to 'unite with all peace and freedom loving countries and peoples throughout the world.... to oppose jointly imperialist aggression and defend lasting world peace' (The Common Programme of the PRC, see Selden, 1979, p.189). Its first constitution in 1954 set out a foreign policy of extending diplomatic relations with all countries on the principle of equality, mutual benefit and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Constitution of the PRC, Preamble, 1954). Now at Bandung, Zhou took the opportunity to showcase China's new approach to international relations, successfully allaying suspicions among US-aligned South East Asian states of its intentions to export revolution, with a call on all to set aside differences in ideology and politics and to seek common ground (Montesano, 2008, pp.205-6; Heine et al.2025, pp.51-52).

For China, the conference marked a turning point, breaking through international isolation as it established friendly relations across the wide political spectrum of states and anti-colonial move-

ments from Africa and Asia.<sup>2</sup> China's presence at this birth of an independent South was also significant: with the US threatening new wars and interventions to re-assimilate the colonial spheres under its indirect neocolonial control, using Cold War division as its means, the incorporation of the FPPC into the 10-point Bandung declaration, set out for the future a new non-aligned international agenda, based on equality and the right to development (Acharya, 2016; Lin Chun, 2022). Even as the US, breaking the Geneva agreement, sought to encircle China through a chain of client states hosting its military bases, as radicalized anti-colonial movements surged in the wake of Bandung, Mao was convinced by 1957 that 'the East wind prevails over the West wind' (Mao, 1998, pp.226-232).

### The Call for World Revolution

By 1958, with the USSR on the back foot following its invasion of Hungary, the US turned its focus on ascendant national independence movements endeavoring to create a ring of military bases around the world. With efforts directed in the first place at crisis points in Egypt, Algeria and Indonesia, US interference was to impact on the wider Middle East, North Africa as well as Southeast Asia (Chomsky, 2003, pp.162-5). Still the collective strength of the newly independent states was growing, resisting Cold War division: the first Non-Aligned Conference was convened in 1961; and UNCTAD and the Group of 77 were formed in 1964. Meanwhile China's international position was strengthening as it gained wider recognition across the developing world, and then from France in January 1964, indicating continuing differences within the North (Yahuda, 2011, p.148).

Anticipating US aggression, Mao took advantage of these favorable conditions to reiterate the call in 1964 for the 'broadest united front'...of 'the peoples of the socialist camp, of Asia, Africa, and

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2. Besides Cuba which attended as a full participant, a number of other Latin American states attended as observers.

Latin America, of every continent of the world, of all the countries in love with peace and all the countries suffering from aggression, control, intervention and bullying from the US' (Mao cited in Lin Chun, 2022, p.204). His calculation was that an upsurge of popular resistance and people's wars would cause the US to overstretch, its warships frantically maneuvering between Mediterranean to control the Middle East and North Africa and the Pacific to cover Asia (Gray, 1990, p.323).

This aim to form a broad united front against imperialism brought China into contention with the Soviet Union which, following the Khrushchev-Kennedy rapprochement of 1963, considered that the Cold War had transformed into a peaceful coexistence of competing capitalist and socialist economic models. Soviet strategy was to extend the socialist bloc into the developing world, but as Mao saw it, building socialism in the Third World was premature whilst on the other hand, opposition to US neo-colonial interference and interventionism was rising (Freidman, 2015, pp. 69-100).

From the Chinese perspective, Soviet détente prioritized its own concerns over nuclear disarmament, giving way to US pressure over the nuclear threat. This conciliation not only betrayed the anti-imperialist cause, its bloc-building was becoming dangerously divisive (Gray, 1990, pp.322-5). When the US bombing of North Vietnam commenced in 1965, bringing war right up to China's border once again, its leadership now called for world revolution, urging radical movements rise up through armed struggle and people's war. The easing of tensions following the Geneva Conference was now at an end as US interference in the region as a whole intensified. China had to focus once again on its own survival: its moderate foreign policy approach no longer an option against a superpower with the wherewithal for a massive attack, given overwhelming military means; and one not inhibited from issuing nuclear threats (Gerson, 2007, pp. 84-9).

If at this time, China's foreign policy became confused and incoherent, its situation, as Lin Chun (2022) points out, was extremely complicated. Some misjudgments as to the imminence of revolution

and the strength of the forces of people's war led to some serious mistakes of adventurism and ultra-Leftism, not least in China itself with the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. However, China's radical turn was not without effect in its immediate neighborhood. In 1967, the US military alliance of anti-communist Southeast Asian states, SEATO, disintegrated; instead, ASEAN was formed (Acharya, 2016). Whilst its members clung to their bilateral alliances with the US, ASEAN nevertheless represented a certain degree of autonomy with the US unable to bring Southeast Asia under its military command as it had done Europe through NATO.

The determination of the Indochinese resistance supported by the antiwar movements in the West was weakening the US which, by 1968, was beginning to indicate its interest in negotiations (Chen, 2008, pp.142-3). Meanwhile the influence of developing countries within the UN was growing. In 1971, African states swung the vote in favor of the PRC regaining its lawful seat on the UN Security Council, creating a favorable situation for Nixon's signing of the Shanghai Communique the following year. Acknowledging that Taiwan was a part of China and incorporating the FPPC, the communique set in motion the process of normalization of US-China relations. China was now no longer a target of direct attack. However, the full restoration of US-China diplomatic relations still had to wait until 1979 but when it came, it opened the way for an entirely new era of peace and development not only for China but ultimately for the emergence of a multipolar world.

### From Revolution to Reform

The UN declaration on the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 was an indication of the developing countries' growing collective strength (Desai, 2021, pp.1387-8; Marchand, 1994, pp.291-3). Speaking now as a recognized member of the UN, Deng Xiaoping, Vice Premier of the PRC at the time, delivered a speech in support of the NEIO, significant in marking the beginnings of China's shift to a new emphasis on diplomacy and multilateralism (Deng, 1974). The speech set out a

counter-hegemonic strategy which relied on Third World unity, regardless of whether or not countries adopted a revolutionary or progressive stance, as the main force against superpower domination and aggression, at the same time looking to exploit divisions within the North. The strategy now included the USSR in the latter camp.<sup>3</sup>

From China's perspective at this time, with the US withdrawing from Vietnam, the USSR had become the most problematic power: its advocacy of the Brezhnev doctrine, calling for Soviet military intervention to support socialist rule, not only backed the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, but saw Soviet troops amass on the Chinese border. Uneasiness over Soviet policies among developing countries had been rising since the early 1960s (Friedman, 2015, p.100). Conferences held to unite the Third World were to become platforms to fight out the Sino-Soviet dispute, but even though the Soviet Union had stiffened its opposition to US imperialism to give significant aid to North Vietnam, its approach was still seen to subordinate national independence to the demands of its own defense. Dissatisfaction with both superpowers was shaping a Third Worldist identity which, like China, prioritized concerns over the North-South above the East-West divide (Friedman, 2015, p.178).

The restoration of US-China relations in 1979 dramatically changed China's external environment, allowing a fundamental shift in strategic direction effecting radical changes in both domestic and foreign policy. Opening the door gradually to foreign investment and trade to support development alongside step-by-step market reforms, China was to accelerate its advance into a major world economic power. This domestic reorientation, seeking to strengthen independence through development, was to be matched by international reorientation to pursue the transformation of the unequal world order not through revolution but through reform. As

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3. The speech was elaborated in 1977 into *The Theory of the Three Worlds* and published as "Chairman Mao's Theory of the Differentiation of the Three World's is a Major Contribution to Marxism-Leninism", (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977).

China acceded to the World Bank and the IMF in 1980, this demonstrated a new pragmatic approach to changing existing structures from within.

In 1982, Deng's declared the adoption of an independent and non-aligned foreign policy. This now brought to an end to the policies of 'leaning to one side,' whereby China had looked to the USSR to balance against US hostility up to 1979 to then lean towards the US following the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. By the mid-1980s, the international situation was undergoing a fundamental shift: the Reagan-Gorbachev arms control agreement; the increasing pressure from mass-based anti-nuclear peace movements forcing a retreat from militarism; the greater assertiveness of Western Europe and Japan, were together seen as demonstrating that the capabilities of the two superpowers to sustain their cold war and maintain their monopoly of world affairs was declining. Deng's declaration that the situation in the world had shifted from a footing of 'war and revolution' to one of 'peace and development' in 1985 was transformational (Deng, 1985). With China's leadership now looking to secure a peaceful environment for development over the long term, a new debate on the question of a multipolar future was underway (Clegg, 2009, p. 53).

### Tackling Unipolarity: Looking to the Multipolar Future

Whilst a new door opened for China in 1979, the Third World was fragmenting and US neoliberalism was in ascendancy (Marchand, 1994, pp.293-6). For China, just as relations with the USSR improved, events turned dramatically for the worse as, following the suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrators, the US placed China under sanction again. The collapse of USSR followed, leaving the US the sole world hegemon.

Despite a new wave of US hostility over human rights, China's reaction to the dramatic changes was sober. In fact, diplomatic relations with the US were not completely severed, and relatively few countries complied with the Tiananmen embargo. The door then

remained open for China to keep focused on economic development. Meanwhile, Deng cautioned that China should keep its international profile low. The end of the Cold War actually created space in the early 1990s for China to normalize relations US allies in its regional neighborhood as well as with Vietnam, and China was for the first time, invited to attend the ASEAN meeting in 1991, having helped broker a peace settlement in Cambodia (Heginbotham, 2007, p. 193; Yahuda, 2011, p. 274).

As China saw it, US unipolarity was limited to an extent: reliance on allies created a pattern of 'one superpower, four major powers' - namely Europe, Japan, Russia and China - which gave room for maneuver despite the weakness of the developing countries (see Blum, 2003, p. 243). With diplomatic relations now established with more or less all countries around the world, China began to advance relations further through partnerships, in the first instance with the major powers, at the same time fostering regional organizations involving developing countries as new poles in a multipolar order. A foundational Sino-Russian partnership of strategic coordination was agreed in 1996, partnerships with France (1996) and Germany (1997) followed whilst relations with the UK, India and Japan also advanced. If fragile and tenuous, these arrangements helped in securing access to local markets, investment and technology, whilst also providing a workable frame to handle differences and resolve disputes so as stabilize relations amidst the ratcheting up of hostility by the US (Clegg, 2009, p.69). The Shanghai Five, the forerunner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was formed in 1995. That year, ASEAN admitted the Indochinese states as members, ending the Cold War division of Southeast Asia and paving the way for ASEAN plus 3 in 1997 bringing in China, Japan and South Korea. Eventually, China's efforts to maneuver into a stronger position whilst keeping the focus on development, were to pay off when China gained accession to the WTO in 2001. This milestone in China's entry into the international order was to be sure a 'double edged sword': it involved compromise but the overall government kept the initiative in its own hands.

The US invasion of Iraq (2003), following that of Afghanistan in

(2001), aimed to secure its sole superpower status against the rise of potential competitors turned simultaneously a multipolar moment of opposition to US hegemonism as under pressure from grassroots antiwar movements France and Germany joined Russia, India and the majority of developing states to rule the US-led action illegal.<sup>4</sup>

For China, this moment opened a new strategic opportunity (Eisenman et al., 2002, p. xiv). Even though the secondary major powers soon gave way again to US pressure, US entanglement in wars in the Middle East left China relatively free from external challenges. As developing countries, strengthened by a commodities boom driven not least by China's rapid economic growth, began to regroup, China now gave more priority to developing world relations, not least to secure oil and other raw material supplies. At the same time, coordination between Brazil, South Africa, China and India in WTO Doha round negotiations in 2003 opened new prospects of South-South cooperation (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 91).

Whilst essentially maintaining a low profile, China quietly but significantly increased its role in UN peacekeeping. New principles for a New Political and Economic Order were set out followed by a new concept of common security emphasizing mutuality, common interest and trust to resolve conflicts through dialogue to increase understanding and build consensus through consultation. In these ways, China sought to reassure partners of its peaceful intentions against increasing assertions by the US of the "China threat" (Chen, 2008, p.149; Heginbotham, 2006, p.196). At the same time, with a new trend of regionalization growing, China took the opportunity to establish a series of multilateral cooperative forums - the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, the SCO in 2001, the China-Arab States Cooperative Forum in 2004, and the China-CELAC forum (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) in 2005. With the US turning to unilateralism and aggression, therefore, China's response was to counter this

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4. This was the formula of the "Wolfowitz doctrine" associated with then US Under Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, as presented in the 1992 US Defense Guidance Planning document.

through greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy, reform of the international order and the decision-making role of the UN, outlining, if only in the vaguest terms, alternative ways thinking about peace and development.

### Xi Jinping: Taking New Initiatives

Following accession to the WTO in 2001 China's economy grew fast, doubling in size between 2000 and 2010 and then doubling again to 2020. When in 2008, Western capitalism plunged into crisis, China seized the moment to take multipolarization one step forward: its massive injection of state funds to boost its own economy pumped momentum into the wider world economy and the Global North, now realizing its own limits in coping with financial collapse, turned to the G20, so as to draw the larger developing countries, especially China, into a coordinated global response.

Meanwhile, China also began to take a more active role at international negotiations, such as the climate summit of 2009 where it defended the principle of special and differential treatment. Using both resistance and compliance, it sought to deflect US power plays and gain leverage in pursuit of a new fairer international governance (Clegg, 2011).

Even as Obama launched into his Asian pivot, conditions were seen as favorable for China, and Xi Jinping, by 2012 in place as the CPC General Secretary, took the initiative to launch two major international developments - the Belt and Road initiative (2009) and the BRICS (2013) - both promoting multipolarity.

The BRI, an ambitious infrastructure development strategy, was initially aimed to strengthen connectivity between Europe and Asia through a land-based "Belt" and a maritime "Road" route with a view to enhancing trade, investment, and cultural exchange. Today, through a vast array of projects, including roads, railways, ports and energy pipelines with an estimated total value of at least \$900 billion, it connects China worldwide, encompassing also its growing economic relations across Africa and Latin America, whilst

including a number of smaller developed states in the EU as well as New Zealand. Initially dismissed in the West as lacking a clear plan hence unlikely to be of much consequence, the BRI typifies China's approach to development based on trial and error. Western disparagement was to quickly turn to criticism as China's "no strings attached" approach to lending proved hugely attractive to developing countries, for decades starved of infrastructure funding by the West. However, their warnings of a "debt trap" have been exposed as "mythical" (Brautigam and Rithmire, 2021).

Similarly written off too soon by the West, the BRICS, having recently expanded its membership from five to ten, now comprises 40 per cent of the world population, and holds around 40 percent of world GDP greater than the G7 at less than 30 percent. The original five members, as large developing countries with growing production and markets, were to see mutual benefit in exploring relations in trade and investment. At the same time, they saw advantage in bringing their bargaining power to bear as a collective to call for reform for example to the World Bank and IMF. Less a rival to the G7, they aimed to serve as an important vehicle for advancing North-South dialogue not least in the G20 (Clegg, 2024). In the last decade, the group has been building consensus over issues of development, finance, global health, AI and climate.

Through the BRI and the BRICS, China has gained valuable experience in international development including in world development finance through the New Development Bank (NDB, 2014) serving the BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 2016) serving the BRI. The latter now involves over 140 countries, offering new, if still limited, ways of bringing developed and developing countries together in constructive ways.

### Stepping Into the Lead Amidst Turbulent Times

Trump's launch into a New Cold War in 2020 reinforced by Biden's "democracies versus autocracies" agenda, was to unleash a new wave of anti-China hostility alongside a further build-up of US mili-

tary in the Pacific through the Quad and AUKUS.<sup>5</sup> In response, Xi took a more proactive role using head of state diplomacy to elevate partnerships to a new level so as to counteract US pressures on others to decouple. In doing so, Xi has made a point of meeting leaders not only from major powers but from all types of states, regardless of size.

It was Xi's speech to the world's business elites at Davos in 2022 that essentially announced China's arrival as a leader on their world stage. Bringing to attention China's vision of the world as a community with a shared future, the speech caused a stir amongst these powers-that-be whose world was becoming engulfed in multiple crises of COVID, climate, debt sustainability (Xi Jinping, 2017a). Then, with the global agenda hijacked once more, this time by the West's "Ukraine cause", developing countries, seeing their interests sidelined yet again, and with alarm bells ringing at the expulsion of Russia from SWIFT, were beginning to intensify their search for alternatives to the failing international order.

In an offer of guidance here, Xi was to refine China's vision of a shared world future with three initiatives: on global development (2021); on security (2022), and on civilizational exchange (2023) (see Kewalramani, 2025). Laying out a series of stabilizing precepts from which to frame a new system of international cooperative governance, the initiatives draw the lessons from past demands for both development and peace as well as more recent experiences of the BRI and BRICS. Whilst the Global Development Initiative essentially revives the 1974 Third World call for an NIEO, the Global Security Initiative now combines the FPPC with the call for security for all - that original proposition of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, that no single nation could effectively address global challenges alone (Clegg, 2024). The Global Civilization Initiative addresses the issue of the world's diversity in a challenge to the New Cold War mentality that different cultures, values and systems are essentially

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5. For a discussion of the characteristics of the New Cold War, see Woodward, 2017.

incompatible. Its call for mutual learning can be seen as way to balance unity with the world's diversity in accordance with the Bandung way of setting aside differences and seeking common ground as a means of resisting the West's colonial-style and Cold War divide and rule. In this way, China is beginning to step forward as a major power on the international stage.

## **China's Evolving Diplomacy: Finding Continuities**

This account demonstrates how against overwhelming odds, China withstood US hostility to stabilize its external environment, setting its own course of development, whilst maneuvering cautiously to gradually strengthen its position in the wider world. China's course since 1949 was to be a learning process, accumulating experiences to use in refining more flexible ways to manage the balance between confrontation and adaptation as changing configurations of power within and between the Global North and South presented not only challenges but also opportunities.

China's trajectory has intertwined with the emergence of the Global South: from the outset, it has seen its interests in overcoming poverty, realizing economic development, consolidating independence - in its own case achieving reunification, and gaining equal recognition in the world - as shared in common with the rest of the developing world. In pursuing the long-term goal of a "more just and rational order" with the FPPC as its foundation, China has extended its diplomatic reach step by step. As a large developing country, it has been able to deploy particular leverage in a strategy designed to foster as broad a coalition as possible of developing countries including both progressive or reactionary regimes whilst seeking out weaknesses amongst the dominant powers of the North (see Gurtov, 2010, p. 20; Friedman, 2015, p. 39).

It was the initial recognition by the newly independent states that helped China, as it balanced between the two superpowers, to break out of its Cold War isolation and emerge as an independent pole in the world from the mid 1980s. As an opportunity opened, if limited, for economic development, China began gradually to inte-

grate into the international economic order, keeping overall control over its own development trajectory. This allowed a new diplomacy of strategic partnerships, used to lessen the tensions and strains generated by its ongoing rise, allaying fears of a “China threat” whilst demonstrating the advantages of cooperation as well as the costs should relations deteriorate (Clegg, 2009, p.69). At the same time, China further developed its networks, deepening its diplomacy with developing countries also through regional organizations.

In these ways, China found room to maneuver, adjusting to power realignments within the North, so to take the opportunity when US ‘seized the unipolar moment’ to float alternative concepts of international order and security. From there, China began to trial alternative forms of governance in the form of the BRICS and BRI. Acting within the constraints of the external environment, taking each step as preparation for the next, China has been able to do more with its diplomacy the more its economy has grown; at the same time, the stronger the voice of the developing countries as a collective, the more China has also been able to do.

As it shifted from revolutionary change, challenging the international order from without, to calling for reform of the international order from within, China has come to lay increasing emphasis on multilateral diplomacy to counterbalance the worsening unilateralist tendencies of the US. The discussion here has emphasized the continuities with Mao, Deng and his successors, and now Xi, all sharing in the long-term agenda of world peace and development, emphasizing the need for the self-reliance and unity of developing countries as a whole. Others have argued that Mao, in calling for world revolution, abandoned the principled Bandung stand on peaceful coexistence (Chen, 2008, p.141; Benvenuti et al. 2022, p.108). However, these arguments fail to take account of the hostile conditions in China’s immediate neighborhood at the time. Protecting the state’s hard-won independence had to be the priority: peaceful coexistence, understood not as a compromise but as conditional on all five principles including sovereignty and territorial integrity, was impossible. At the same time, opposing the bloc-building strategy of the USSR, Mao’s call for the broadest possible

unity across the developing world, as opposed to picking and choosing friends and allies, has remained the fundamental aspect of China's foreign policy.

## **China and Multipolarity: Mapping Future Directions of Study**

Keeping long term goals in mind, China's declarations are notably aspirational. This discussion has aimed to demonstrate the value of the historical approach in understanding China's claims today to "foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind" (Xi Jinping, 2017b). Exploring the development of China's diplomacy, the overview has traced China's pursuit of its goals within the shifts and changes in global power relations. It has argued that rather than setting itself up as a counter model along the lines of the Soviet Union, China looks to resist the US challenge by driving multipolarization forward, scaling up the economies of the Global South through the promotion cooperative trade and development. By highlighting the consistency of China's strategic rationale in opposing division and calling for the united efforts of the Global South to transform the unequal North-South relationship, this discussion offers an analytical frame within which to interpret China's role in the current multipolar trajectory.

With China now positioned for a global leadership role, how it can become a more effective international actor as its economic and military power grows is a key question for the global future. Murphy, for example, from her study of China's interactions with the Middle East and Africa, has suggested that 'if the current liberal world order crumbles, China has parallel structures to take its place' (2022, p.275). Nevertheless, there is still some way to go in China's quest for an international relations system based on the FPPC.

The focus of discussion here has been on just one dimension: China's political role in the international sphere. Equally of importance is the aspect of China's economic diplomacy which again can be traced back to the Bandung Conference (Liu, 2022). Examining how this has matched the historical pattern of political diplomacy

would contribute significantly to furthering understanding of China's global role.

Taking seriously China's understanding that its goals can be realized only in a peaceful international environment and under a stable international order, the line of argument taken here has looked to draw a correspondence, if not complete overlap, of China's national interests and the interests of the Global South as a collective in securing international conditions conducive to development. Nevertheless, the relationship between China and the rest of the Global South is clearly not without ongoing friction. Not only are Chinese exports extremely competitive with the latter's domestic industries, they also can crowd out their export markets (Dittmer, 2010, p.9). Beyond the general approach taken here, a deeper delving into China's partnerships with developing countries could usefully test out the 'win-win' nature of agreements, and the extent to which both parties are learning from experience to articulate their interests and adjust to differences.

In the case of the BRI, criticisms over debt sustainability, transparency, governance, and environmental impact, although often overblown, are not without substance. Nevertheless, China is proving not incapable of learning from mistakes and shortcomings so as to improve sustainability and focus more on local benefit and job creation, orienting towards renewable energy and the digital economy (Gallagher et al., 2025; Martine and du Plessis, 2023).<sup>6</sup> The extent to which greater BRI connectivity creates opportunities for enterprises and industries in developing countries to break through into competitive world markets is also a matter worth further investigation.

Within the Global South, unity has long been plagued by problems of political synchronization, given the large numbers of countries involved with their diversity in political systems, levels of

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6. It is to be noted that Gallagher et. Al. find China's exports of low carbon technologies are significantly reducing carbon emissions in the countries they trade with, and provide developing countries with both environmental and technological opportunities.

development, and cultures (Gürcan, 2022, p. 144). China is now looking especially to BRICS+ to play a strategic role in turning the world situation from confrontation to cooperation. Whilst itself made up of different government styles and ideologies, as a far smaller grouping, BRICS+ may find it easier to apply the Bandung spirit to set aside differences, working together to develop a common programme around which the wider Global South can coordinate and unite in dealing collectively with US protectionism and unilateralism. The challenge of analyzing BRICS+ in its diversity, with India as well as China a critical pillar of the Global South, remains at the forefront in study of multipolarization and the prospects for alternative forms of global governance emerging.<sup>7</sup>

With the international situation trending towards confrontation, China is becoming more active on questions of international security. New developments in diplomacy, such as China's proposal on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis and the promotion of the new international mediation-based dispute resolution group in Hong Kong open up further areas of research (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2023; Leung, 2025). Not unsurprisingly, the Ukraine proposal has been completely ignored by the US and EU, but the point is that such efforts provide a collective focus within the UN. Relatedly, Artner (2022) emphasizes the importance of strengthening the United Nations' role as a defender of the interests of the developing world. With China increasingly looking to the UN as the means for counter US unilateralism, exploring its efforts to rebuild the organization from within, strengthening its decision-making role, could test further the correspondence of interest between China and the Global South.

Today China's primary concern is to deflect US hawkishness: so far it is maintaining a positive view of the international trend going forward towards peace and development. Its assessment rests importantly on the calculation that, with global crises multiplying, the

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7. For a measured response to arguments that view the rise of the BRICS as a replica of the pattern of Northern domination, exploiting inequalities within the Global South, see Desai (2021). See also Clegg (2024).

contradictions between the Global North and South, and within the Global North, will grow sharper. But with continued US military interference stoking tensions in the South China Sea and over Taiwan, will China keep to its peaceful trajectory? As history has shown, conditions in its immediate neighborhood are China's key consideration; at the same time, it sees these conditions as influenced by the overall international balance of power, with the collective strength of the emerging Global South standing out as the critical factor. Meanwhile, China's dual approach—building a more inclusive FPPC-based multilateralism from below while gradually coordinating its bilateral partnerships and regional organizations, and consolidating its position within a multipolar world marked by a more even global distribution of economic power—should move to the center of international studies.

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## Author Biography

Jenny Clegg (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9204-7990>) is a specialist on China with long-standing scholarly engagement in the country's political and social development. She first travelled to China in 1971 and has closely followed its domestic transformations and evolving international role over subsequent decades. She received her PhD from the University of Manchester in 1989, with a dissertation examining the relationship between peasantry and revolution in China. Following the completion of her doctorate, she held academic appointments as a Senior Lecturer in Afro-Asian Studies and Asia-Pacific Studies at universities in northern England. Her latest book is *Storming the Heavens: Peasants and Revolution in China, 1925-1949* (Manifesto Press, 2025).

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