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Introduction

THE CHINA FIRST GLOBAL STRATEGY

ON A clear September morning in 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping mounted the steps of a grand viewing platform in Tiananmen Square, flanked by Vladimir Putin on one side and Kim Jong-un on the other, as television cameras broadcast the striking image around the world. Behind them followed a procession of leaders from mostly non-Western countries—Iran, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe, among others. They had come to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, but the moment was about more than remembrance. The carefully choreographed spectacle was designed to show China at the forefront of a widening circle of partners, challenging Western dominance and claiming a central place in a changing world order.

The parade capped a week of high-profile diplomacy. Days earlier in Tianjin, Xi had hosted a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—often described as a China-led counterweight to Western institutions. His address before two dozen leaders carried familiar refrains: warnings against “Cold War mentality,” “hegemonism,” and “protectionism”—thinly veiled swipes against the United States.¹ His rhetoric echoed a worldview that had hardened in Beijing: the belief that Washington and its allies were working to stifle China’s “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”—its decades-long project of becoming richer, stronger, and more influential. A few years earlier, at a gathering of Party leaders in 2023, Xi had issued an unusually blunt

public warning that “Western countries led by the United States” were carrying out “all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression” of China, posing “unprecedented and severe challenges” to his country’s development.²

Having braced for a protracted rivalry with the United States long before 2023, Beijing had been steadily deepening its partnerships around the world—strengthening ties with Russia, its former ally, later adversary, and now “no limits” partner; revamping relations with North Korea, China’s only remaining formal ally; and expanding its reach across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. In Tianjin, Xi sought to draw a contrast between China and the United States, pledging to uphold multilateralism, common development, and what he called a “more democratic, just, and equitable” international order.³ He unveiled the “Global Governance Initiative,” the latest in a series of Xi-era frameworks designed to cast China as a shaper and protector of global rules and norms. Two days later, before the assembled dignitaries in Tiananmen Square, Xi warned that the world faced a choice between “peace and war, dialogue and confrontation,” vowing that China would “firmly stand on the right side of history.”⁴

Yet the contradiction was difficult to ignore. Xi’s two chief guests of honor at the parade—Putin, waging an unprovoked war against Ukraine, and Kim, accelerating a nuclear program in open defiance of international norms—embodied the very behaviors Beijing claimed to oppose. Their deepening cooperation, including Pyongyang’s transfers of troops, ammunition, and missiles to help the Russian war effort, and Beijing’s own expanding trade with Moscow, directly contravened the peace proposal for ending the war in Ukraine that China and Brazil had jointly released a year earlier. That initiative, which explicitly called for “no expansion of the battlefield,” had been designed to project Chinese leadership of a unified Global South position.

Beijing’s intended message for the world at Tiananmen was clear: China was not isolated and had friends willing to stand with it in an era of strategic competition. But the inconsistencies were just as visible. To push back against perceived “Western encirclement,” Beijing had drawn closer to disruptive partners whose actions were undercutting the very

principles it professed to champion. It was a vivid portrait of China in the present era—eager to claim leadership in shaping the international order yet unwilling to bear the responsibilities or costs of sustaining it.

Breaking Encirclement, Avoiding Constraints

Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has faced a competitive environment, hemmed in by great powers and wary neighbors. Its longstanding preoccupation with strategic encirclement—the prospect of hostile states banding together to undermine its sovereignty, threaten its security and prosperity, and suppress its rise—and its determination to break free of it have constituted one of the most enduring forces shaping China's global strategy. This is not the only driver of Beijing's strategy; no great power's behavior can be reduced to a single motive. But it has remained a persistent and defining concern, shaping how China sees the world and how it engages with it. Beijing's response has been to pursue a proactive campaign to cultivate partners, fragment rival coalitions, and constantly maneuver to shape the balance of power so that no actor or group can decisively block its ascent—or, in its own terms, its “return” (复兴 *fuxing*) to great power status.

Much of the debate about China's behavior has revolved around a stark binary. One view—now dominant in Washington—sees Beijing as on an expansive quest for global hegemony, systematically working to overtake the United States in every major region and domain.⁵ Another view, diminished since Xi's rise to power, portrays China as a status quo actor, focused on narrowly defending its sovereignty, regime security, and economic development.⁶ The first view overstates China's appetite for sprawling power projection and comprehensive primacy; the latter undersells its ambitions. A China determined to rule the world would seek to be the paramount military, economic, and diplomatic power in all regions, comprehensively displacing U.S. presence and leadership and demanding full allegiance from its partners. That is not what Beijing is doing. But neither is China a minimalist, defensive actor content to tend to its domestic demands and its immediate neighborhood. Such a state would not invest so heavily in cultivating partners in

distant regions, including Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, or in reshaping existing international institutions and building new ones to amplify its voice. There is no doubt that China seeks to outpace the United States in many critical domains: achieving military primacy in its region, becoming the world's largest economy, and winning the race for technological leadership. These ambitions are real, pose risks, and are consequential for the global balance of power—but they only tell part of the story.

Equally important is how China approaches its relationships—its ties with great powers, middle powers, and the developing world—and how it conceives of its role in the world. Unlike Washington, which built a global alliance network at the apex of its power and underwrote the post–World War II order, or Moscow, which controlled a formal bloc through the Warsaw Pact, Beijing has avoided binding alignments ever since its costly experiences in the early Cold War. But its aversion to alliances does not mean passivity. China, like its great power peers, seeks power and influence. And in recent decades, it has used its vastly expanded resources to widen its network of strategic partners, build alternative coalitions across the Global South, shape global norms, and entrench its presence in distant regions at a pace unmatched in earlier eras.

A closer look at China's record, however, reveals that it is less interested in engineering its partnerships for maximum control than in shaping them for flexibility. Nor is it willing to expend the effort required to uphold the very norms and stable international order it purports to defend. Rather, it prizes maximum strategic autonomy—the ability to act decisively and without regard for rules when its own interests are threatened; to tighten, loosen, or discard partnerships at will; and to leave others to shoulder the costs of global instability. In short, China's global strategy is best understood as a quest to build influence while remaining unconstrained—free from strategic encirclement, free from the burdens of alliances and external obligations, and free from ideological and moral restraints.

The central challenge, then, is less a China bent on global hegemony than one that destabilizes the international order behind a veneer of

great power leadership. By shielding rogue states to keep them on its side while disclaiming responsibility for their actions, defending institutions and norms only when convenient while relentlessly pursuing its own narrow interests, and leaving major crises for others to manage, China has become a power of enormous weight but limited accountability—a state that seeks to shape the international order to its advantage without committing itself to sustaining it.

The Long Arc of China's Global Strategy

This book begins at the founding of the PRC and traces the evolution of its global strategy across seven decades—from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Many contemporary analyses of Chinese statecraft start later, focusing on the Reform and Opening period, China's twenty-first-century ascent, or Xi's rise to power. This study looks further back to uncover the roots of China's persistent strategic anxieties, the ways it has sought to manage them, and how its global strategy has evolved over time. In doing so, it reveals the deep continuities in how China perceives its strategic environment and the enduring strengths and limitations of its approach to the world—insights that are critical for understanding China today and the paths it may take in the future.

China has always lived in a crowded neighborhood of great powers and regional rivals. Its response has been to maneuver among what Mao Zedong once called the “Three Worlds.” At the apex stand the great powers: the United States, long viewed in Beijing as the principal architect of China's strategic encirclement, and the Soviet Union (today Russia), a power that has oscillated between partner and threat, serving at times as a counterweight to U.S. dominance and, for two decades during the Cold War, as China's primary adversary. Beneath this tier sit the U.S.-aligned middle powers of Europe and Asia, which Beijing views as key enablers of American containment efforts and, therefore, as prime targets for loosening its strategic encirclement. At the base are the developing states of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—the Global South—which China has long regarded as a natural constituency, bound by shared histories of anti-imperialism and aspirations for

development. Beijing has sought to work each tier to its advantage: balancing one great power against the other, courting and pressuring middle powers in attempts to erode their alignment with Washington, and positioning itself as the leader of a broad coalition across the developing world.

China's sense of strategic encirclement has ebbed and flowed, and the relative importance of each tier has shifted with its changing threat perceptions. When pressure intensified from one great power, Beijing leaned more heavily on the other. When alienated from both, it turned to the middle and developing worlds. And when relations with the major powers stabilized and encirclement fears eased, the developing world receded in priority. Over time, China's leaders have learned from these cycles. Early experiences with treaty alliances in the 1950s and 1960s—costly and disastrous—left Beijing determined never again to be constrained by formal commitments or the dictates of another great power or junior partner. What emerged instead was a more opportunistic approach: cultivating relationships widely but keeping them flexible, transactional, and free of binding obligations.

Yet this strategy has rarely worked seamlessly in practice. Beijing's relationships across all three tiers have proved fraught and often limited. It has been estranged from both great powers at times, and even periods of close alignment with one have been constrained by mutual mistrust. China's outreach to middle powers and developing states has likewise faced obstacles: wariness of its assertiveness, unresolved territorial disputes and historical grievances, and among U.S. allies, continued reliance on American security guarantees that limits how close they can draw to Beijing without jeopardizing their relationship with Washington. Even in the Global South, where China has enjoyed rapid influence gains, backlash has followed when its conduct has exhibited extractive and coercive characteristics. China's relationship with its only remaining formal ally, North Korea, is marked by deep mutual distrust and divergent priorities, with both sides fearing entrapment by the other. These recurring frictions and structural constraints underscore the difficulties Beijing faces in cultivating durable, genuine partnerships.

China's Global Strategy in an Era of Heightened Strategic Competition

Today, China wields far greater resources than ever before, harbors heightened leadership ambitions, and faces a sharpened rivalry with the United States. Armed with more capacity, Beijing has intensified its engagement across all “Three Worlds.” It has strengthened its partnership with Moscow, repaired ties with Pyongyang, deepened outreach across the Global South, and alternately courted and pressured U.S.-aligned states to pursue greater “strategic autonomy.” It has elevated its role in established multilateral bodies and invested heavily in newer ones—the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and PRC-led regional forums in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—using them to amplify its influence and counterbalance Western-led institutions.

Beijing sees opportunity in growing discontent with a U.S.-led international order. It believes grievances over systemic inequities and frustration with Western-led institutions in the Global South, and an increasingly transactional “America First” posture in Washington have opened space for expanding Chinese influence. Yet for all its rhetoric about supporting multilateralism and safeguarding international fairness and justice, Beijing does not aspire to serve as a global guarantor of those principles or to incur the costs of contesting U.S. leadership and presence in regions it deems peripheral to its core interests. At the same time, even as Beijing continues to challenge “Western dominance” and criticize “U.S.-led encirclement,” it does not seek to fully sever its ties with the United States or its allies. It continues to treat U.S.-aligned middle powers in Europe and Asia as potential swing states—partners that can moderate U.S. policies if courted skillfully. Toward Washington, this translates into a dual-track strategy of simultaneously counterbalancing American power while preserving engagement to prevent a complete rupture in bilateral relations.

In an era of heightened strategic competition, China's global strategy remains focused on advancing national rejuvenation on Beijing's own terms—making the country stronger, richer, and more influential while

preserving its freedom of action and avoiding the burdens of global stewardship. It is, in essence, a “China First” strategy. Yet this approach carries inherent limits. By avoiding costly commitments and privileging flexible, transactional ties, Beijing often undermines its ability to cultivate loyal partners and build durable coalitions. Its coercive behavior and its shielding of revisionist partners reinforce the very counter-coalitions it seeks to weaken and erode the stability of the international order from which it benefits. The very strategy that maximizes Beijing’s flexibility also leaves it increasingly exposed to the consequences of global disorder.

Roadmap of the Book

The chapters that follow chart the evolution of China’s global strategy over time and across its key relationships. The first chapter establishes the book’s core analytical framework, offering a panoramic account of how the PRC has navigated shifting threats and opportunities across five distinct phases of its foreign policy. Each phase is organized around two core questions: where did Beijing perceive its most acute source of strategic encirclement, and how did it reorder its ties with great powers, U.S.-aligned middle powers, and the developing world to manage that threat?

The first phase begins in the early Cold War, when the newly founded People’s Republic “leaned to one side” toward the Soviet Union to balance against what it saw as a threatening, U.S.-dominated world. That alliance provided protection and resources but quickly revealed the dangers of dependence. The second phase emerged as the Sino-Soviet split unfolded, when Beijing—squeezed between two hostile powers—turned to the developing world and U.S.-aligned middle powers to diversify its external ties. These efforts, however, were constrained by structural limits: China could not match the scale of economic and security assistance offered by Washington or Moscow, and U.S. policies limited the extent to which its allies could deepen their ties with Beijing. The third phase marked a strategic reversal. As conflict with Moscow intensified, Beijing pursued rapprochement with Washington, opening

the door to China's deep economic and diplomatic integration into the international arena. In the fourth phase, under a unipolar post-Cold War order dominated by the United States, China sought again to diversify its ties—strengthening relations with post-Soviet Russia and the Global South while remaining economically intertwined with the West. The fifth and current phase reflects the emergence of a far more ambitious China, operating from a position of extraordinary economic scale, diplomatic capacity, and global reach. Confronted with what it perceives as intensified U.S.-led encirclement, Beijing has moved quickly to expand its influence through a growing network of largely transactional, non-binding partnerships and coalitions, as well as initiatives designed to enhance its international standing. Yet even as it has broadened its global footprint, Beijing has consciously avoided the burdens of underwriting either the existing international order or a coherent alternative to it.

The chapters that follow offer focused case studies on China's most consequential relationships. Chapter 2 examines the long, uneasy arc of China's ties with Russia, from early revolutionary dependence and bitter Cold War rupture to the tightly choreographed “no limits” partnership unveiled on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It traces how Beijing has repeatedly turned to Moscow when Chinese leaders perceived Western encirclement to be intensifying—first under Mao and then again in the post-Cold War era. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, shared grievances toward the West and a common ambition to reshape the international order have produced heightened Sino-Russian coordination across military, economic, and diplomatic domains. Yet the chapter also shows that Beijing has carefully structured the partnership to limit its exposure to Moscow's military adventurism and preserve its strategic autonomy. Enduring historical suspicions, conflicting strategic outlooks, and hedging behavior on both sides underscore that this alignment remains fundamentally conditional. The result is a partnership that is consequential but fragile, shaped as much by mistrust and asymmetry as by shared purpose.

The next chapter explores China's complicated and fraught relationship with its only formal ally, North Korea. From its origins in the Korean War to Xi Jinping's uneasy embrace of Kim Jong-un, the

China-North Korea alliance has oscillated between solidarity and strain—sustained less by trust or shared ideology than by Beijing’s persistent fear of strategic encirclement and loss of influence on its periphery. The chapter traces the evolution of Beijing’s approach to Pyongyang from revolutionary brotherhood to reluctant guardianship, showing how Beijing has sustained the Kim regime without assuming responsibility for its behavior. It demonstrates how North Korea’s provocations have repeatedly strengthened, rather than weakened, U.S. alliances in Asia, damaging China’s security interests even as Beijing clings to the legacy alliance. The chapter concludes by examining how Pyongyang’s deepening ties with Moscow in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war complicate Beijing’s relations with Pyongyang and whether the growing alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea—often described as an “axis of autocracies”—constitutes a coherent strategic bloc or a more limited alignment driven by overlapping interests.

Chapter 4 examines how Beijing has transformed its long standing engagement with developing countries into a central pillar of its global strategy. Tracing its approach from Mao-era “Third World” activism to Xi Jinping’s call for “major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics,” the chapter demonstrates how Chinese leaders have repeatedly turned to the developing world in periods of intensified pressure from great powers to loosen strategic encirclement and mobilize support for China’s core interests. Under Xi, these efforts have expanded dramatically, as China has strengthened strategic partnerships across far-flung regions and promoted alternative coalitions across the globe. Yet the chapter also highlights the limits of this strategy: the flexible, transactional relationships that have broadened China’s reach have not necessarily produced deep or dependable alignment, raising questions about how much support Beijing can count on from its Global South partners in moments of crisis.

The fifth chapter traces China’s campaign to dilute U.S. alliance cohesion in Asia and Europe by courting U.S.-aligned middle powers. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, Beijing has sought to exploit tensions within U.S. alliances and the appeal of economic engagement with China to weaken the effects of perceived U.S.-led containment.

Although Beijing never succeeded in fundamentally reorienting these states away from the United States, it benefited enormously from engagement with them, drawing on their capital, technology, and markets to support China's modernization and rise. But its efforts have also faced limits, shaped by these states' security dependence on the United States, disputes over historical legacies and clashing territorial claims, and backlash against Beijing's coercive behavior. Today, the phrase that once defined China's relations with U.S. allies, "hot economics, cold politics," has given way to "cooling economics and colder politics."

The next chapter examines how Beijing has sought to manage its relationship with the United States—the power Chinese leaders have long viewed as the principal architect of China's strategic encirclement. Whereas the preceding chapters trace Beijing's efforts to loosen external constraints through partnerships with other states, this chapter turns to its complicated history of engagement with Washington itself. From Mao's early overtures for U.S. recognition of the PRC to Xi Jinping's pursuit of a "new type of great power relationship" with Washington, Chinese leaders have long sought grand bargains to redefine Sino-U.S. relations on terms more favorable to Beijing. Yet these efforts have repeatedly followed a familiar cycle: outreach, disappointment, coercive assertion, and recalibration. Across the Cold War, the era of engagement, and the current period of intensifying strategic competition, Beijing has consistently melded pragmatism with assertiveness, aiming to reduce U.S. pressure and constraints while avoiding a rupture that could push the relationship into open confrontation.

The conclusion assesses the implications of China's global strategy for the future of international order and evaluates the strengths, limits, and contradictions of Beijing's "China First" approach. In many respects, this strategy has worked to China's advantage, allowing Beijing to portray itself as a leading international power, cultivate an expansive network of partners and coalitions, and persuade many governments to support its positions and initiatives. Yet by prioritizing flexibility and avoiding binding commitments, Beijing has struggled to translate its widening network into relationships capable of generating durable trust, reliable support, or meaningful coalition power. At the same time,

China's global strategy risks destabilizing the broader international system. By narrowly prioritizing its own interests and minimizing exposure to crises rather than actively managing them, Beijing perpetuates global and regional instability that ultimately threatens its own interests.

The final chapter also considers the conditions under which Beijing's global strategy might evolve, including whether a dramatic weakening of existing U.S.-led alliances and a significant easing of China's longstanding fears of strategic encirclement could inspire Beijing to underwrite a new international order instead of selectively reshaping the existing one. It concludes that rather than a clear transfer of leadership from one dominant power to another, the emerging era is more likely to be defined by the erosion of great power stewardship—one in which states are less interested in sustaining order than in preserving their freedom of action. How long such a system can endure under these conditions may become the defining question in the decades ahead. For the United States and others confronting this reality, the challenge will be to manage a China that seeks the privileges of global influence without assuming commensurate responsibilities—while resisting the temptation to follow the same path themselves.

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