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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX Foreword

MICHEL GUGLIELMO TORRI, *Asia in 2025: The unravelling of the Asian order in the pincer of great power pressure and domestic strain*

Articles

- 1 FLORA SAPIO, *China 2025: «Focus our energies on doing our own things well»*
- 25 VERONICA STRINA, *China's 2025: Forging a new global role*
- 53 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2025: Political transition and strategic consolidation*
- 87 RAYMOND YAMAMOTO & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2025: External shocks, domestic turbulence and the rise of Takaichi Sanae*
- 131 STEFANO PELAGGI, *Taiwan 2024-2025: Constraint, adaptation, and the cross-strait equilibrium*
- 155 THAN KIÜ, *Hong Kong 2025: Conditioned continuity under National Security*
- 173 ENRICO GLORIA, *The Philippines 2024-2025: Feuding families, weak institutions, and the limits of Philippine democracy*
- 193 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI & NÜR RAFEEDA DAUT, *Malaysia 2025: ASEAN chairmanship under the Madani framework*
- 209 TEUKU REZA FADELI, *Indonesia 2025: The «Red-and-White» project and the consolidation of executive dominance*
- 267 CHRISTINE CABASSET, *Timor-Leste 2025: The 11th ASEAN member and new challenges*
- 285 FABIO FIGIACONI, *Vietnam 2025: Tô Lâm's powerplay and the limits of bamboo diplomacy*
- 299 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2025: Resilience in the face of economic and geopolitical insecurity*
- 319 PAUL CHAMBERS, *Thailand 2025: A year of insecurity and transition*
- 341 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2025: The military eschews off-ramping and fights back, as the polycrisis carries on*
- 361 AMIT RANJAN, *Bangladesh in 2025: Under the shadow of «Monsoon Revolution»*
- 389 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2025: Economic paradoxes, political recovery, and the battle for electoral integrity*
- 411 IAN HALL, *India 2025: Turbulence and turmoil in foreign policy*
- 431 PUSPA SHARMA, *Nepal 2024-2025: Political upheaval, economic challenges and mixed foreign relations*
- 453 GULBIN SULTANA, *Sri Lanka 2025: Maiden year of the NPP administration*

477	MARCO CORSI, <i>Pakistan 2025: Internal governance challenges, security perils and foreign policy crosswinds</i>
499	ANAHITA MOTAZED RAD, <i>Iran 2024-2025: Strategic retrenchment amid regional setbacks and systemic pressures</i>
521	CARLO FRAPPI, <i>Azerbaijan 2025: Foreign policy behaviour in a fragmenting Eurasian order</i>
	<i>Special articles</i>
543	DAVID SCOTT, <i>Naval Hegemony and Deterrence: Aircraft carrier strategies and power projection in Asian waters</i>
559	SARA BERLOTO & NICOLÒ FASOLA, <i>From Monopoly to Dual Patronage: The evolution of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia (1991-2025)</i>
585	HAMIDEH SABERI, «We did not make a revolution to go backwards»: <i>The Iranian women's uprising of march 1979 and its systematic erasure from historical memory</i>
601	ENRICO BARTOLOMEI, «Colonialism of a Dual Nature»: <i>Fayez A. Sayegh, the Palestine Research Center and a Palestinian genealogy of the settler colonial paradigm</i>
625	<i>Reviews</i>
653	<i>Appendix</i>

CHINA'S 2025: FORGING A NEW GLOBAL ROLE

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This article analyses China's foreign policy in 2025 as a phase of global role consolidation, manifested most visibly in the introduction of the Global Governance Initiative but extending well beyond it. Drawing on interactionist Role Theory, the study examines how China articulated, performed, and negotiated its global role through diplomatic interactions in a context of intensified international fragmentation and instability. Based on content and narrative analysis of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official statements and policy documents released in 2025, the article argues that neighbourhood and South-South diplomacy emerged as the primary arenas in which China's global role was most significantly relocated, tested, and contested. In doing so, the article suggests that China's foreign policy behaviour throughout the year, rather than signalling a mere turn toward assertiveness, reflects its evolving self-conceptualisation as a global power, entailing a reconfiguration of its role identity as such and its associated dilemmas. Ultimately, it contends that China's global positioning is increasingly reorienting the normative and spatial coordinates of contemporary diplomacy toward the East.

KEYWORDS – China's foreign policy; global role; major-power diplomacy; neighbourhood diplomacy; Global South.

1. Introduction

In 2025, China's foreign policy entered a phase marked by the consolidation of its global role. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Plus meeting in Tianjin on 31 August and 1 September – the largest gathering in the organisation's twenty-four-year history – President Xi Jinping formally introduced the Global Governance Initiative (GGI). As the fourth major global initiative advanced under Xi's leadership, following the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) – referred to as the «three major initiatives» (*san da changyi* 三大倡议), respectively proposed by the Chinese leadership in September 2021, April 2022, and March 2023 – the GGI encapsulates China's growing ambition to shape the principles and practices of global governance. Framed as a response to the perceived inadequacies of existing governance mechanisms, the GGI aims to offer «China's wisdom» and «China's solutions» to promote the building of a more just and

equitable global governance system to the realisation of a «community with a shared future for humanity» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025a, 1 September]. Introduced at a time that Chinese political discourse has described as a «big year for global governance», the initiative portrays the international system as standing at a new crossroads, characterised by deep fragmentation and instability [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025b, 1 September]. Against this backdrop, the GGI is presented as both «timely and crucial», responding to the central question of «what kind of global governance system to build and how to reform and improve» it [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025b, 1 September].

Throughout the year, China's engagement with key global issues was staged across a range of international fora. Among others, on 23 April, Xi addressed the Leaders Meeting on Climate and the Just Transition via video link, marking the tenth anniversary of the Paris Agreement and reiterating China's role as a major contributor to global green development [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 23 April]. Later in October, Beijing hosted the Global Leaders' Meeting on Women to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, where Xi advanced four proposals to promote the global women's cause, framing gender equality as an indispensable force «adding brilliant splendor to the progress of human civilization» [State Council of the PRC 2025, 13 October].

Whilst signalling an unprecedented shift from participation in global governance toward a growing ambition to shape its norms and practices, China's global initiatives and activism also point to an enduring analytical puzzle: the more China expands its global presence and moves to the centre of world politics, the more its global role becomes at once contested and inherently contesting of the prevailing international order.

Understanding how China's global role is articulated requires closer analytical attention to the very notion of role. Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), Role Theory offers a particularly well-suited analytical lens for decoding and tying agential behavioural patterns to social structures, providing a theoretical bridge between foreign policy analysis (FPA) and IR theory [Thies & Breuning 2012]. International roles are fundamental components of international social structures shaped by ego (the Self) and alter (the Other) expectations regarding an actor's purpose within an organised group (Thies 2010, 6336). The premise, therefore, is that roles exist only in relation to counter roles, where both hold expectations over each other [Stryker & Statham 1985]. In this sense, the notion of «global role» – still overlooked within Role Theory scholarship – remains analytically nebulous unless understood as emerging from the multiple and overlapping configurations of international roles emerging from international interactions, which are intercultural in nature [Strina 2025]. Drawing on this understanding grounded on an interactionist approach to Role The-

ory,¹ this article analyses the People's Republic of China (PRC) interactions with the world as they unfold through diplomacy, understood as the process of fostering mutual trust and productive relationships by enabling states to pursue their foreign policy objectives without resorting to propaganda or force [Berridge 2022]. As previously argued in an article on China's foreign policy in 2024 published in this journal [Pelaggi 2025], diplomacy constitutes a central dimension of China's external projection and the way it interacts with the world. Building on this assumption, the present study accords diplomacy a central analytical place to decode the evolution of the PRC's foreign policy in 2025 and its global role-making.

Whether Xi's foreign policy agenda aligns with the same goals as previous leaderships or if this is forging a new diplomatic identity for «a new type of international relations» (*xinxing guoji guanxi* 新型国际关系) with distinct strategic objectives and instruments remains subject of a heated debate within IR scholarship [Smith 2021; Garver 2016; Goldstein 2020; Chang-Liao 2016]. Positions differ widely, with some describing Xi Jinping's foreign policy as «old wine in new bottles» [Cabestan 2012] while others characterising it as newly or increasingly assertive [Swaine 2010], as most recently exemplified by the so-called «wolf warrior diplomacy».² Regardless of divergent positions, the conventional wisdom of a «new assertive» China under Xi Jinping has become the «new common sense» – to say it in Gramscian terms. While such interpretations capture visible shifts in the Chinese leadership's tone and posture, they tend to flatten the relational dynamics through which China's foreign policy is articulated. Adopting a Role Theory perspective may instead allow us to decode China's emerging global role as the result of the interplay between diverging international expectations for China to assume greater responsibility and Beijing's evolving national role conception as a global power.

1. Role Theory is commonly divided into a structuralist and an interactionist strand, with Holsti's seminal work providing a foundational reference for both [Holsti 1970]. Whilst structuralist approaches conceptualise roles as relatively stable social positions shaped primarily by ego conceptions, interactionist approaches view roles as emergent and negotiable patterns of behaviour arising from ongoing ego-alter interactions. This study adopts the interactionist perspective, drawing on George Herbert Mead's social theory and its subsequent development within role theory analysis, including applications to the Chinese case. See Harnisch et al. 2015.

2. The expression «wolf warrior diplomacy» takes its name from the 2015 Chinese action movie 'Wolf Warrior' (*Zhanlang* 战狼). Initially used in Chinese online discourse to mock excessive nationalism, the term was later taken up by Western media to characterise China's increasingly confrontational diplomatic style, marked by sharp rhetoric and nationalist overtones linked to the imperative to secure 'discourse power' (*huayuquan* 话语权). This label became closely associated in particular with diplomat Zhao Lijian, whose combative public statements and social media activity came to exemplify this diplomatic posture. On this theme, see Sullivan and Wang 2022.

This article begins by offering a snapshot of China's global role-making in 2025, exploring the evolution of national role conceptions of «Global China» through qualitative content and narrative analysis of Chinese official policy documents and speeches given throughout the year by President Xi Jinping, the Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson. Narrative analysis, like content analysis, employs speech and text as main sources, but it is more inherently interpretive, enabling «researchers to make robust interpretations of the events that constitute foreign policy traditions and dilemmas – thus intimately portraying the role relationship process» [Wehner 2020, 368]. By employing such a research method, therefore, this article aims to trace changes in Chinese political discourse resulting from China's international interactions via diplomacy. Building on this theoretical and methodological approach, this paper develops an in-depth analysis of China's neighbourhood and South-South diplomacy as the primary arenas in which China's global role has been articulated and tested in 2025. In doing so, the article seeks to provide analytical depth to aggregate indicators of influence, such as those captured by the *Global Soft Power Index 2025*, whereby China ranks second, and the *Asia Power Index*, an annual composite measure of power in Asia developed by the Lowy Institute, which assess states across multiple dimensions, including economic capability, military capacity, diplomatic influence and cultural reach. The 2025 ranking points to a narrowing of the gap between Washington and Beijing's influence in the Asian continent by more than two points compared to the previous year, the smallest margin observed since 2020 [Patton and Sato 2025]. Rather than taking such power scores at face value, this paper probes the deeper relational dynamics of China's global role-making within the region. Accordingly, it aims to advance an interpretive account of how China actively articulated, performed, and negotiated its international role as «Global China» over the course of the year while reorienting the centre of gravity of global diplomacy toward the East. The conclusions reflect on the meanings and challenges of the PRC's activism in global security and governance since 2022-2023 [Sciorati 2024], with the emergence of the Global South as Global China's «most significant Other».

2. China's global role-making in 2025

Throughout 2025, China's global role-making found its most vivid expression in the already mentioned Global Governance Initiative (GGI), which frames the «multipolarisation and democratisation of international relations» as a pathway to better reflect the interests of the Global South and advance global peace and development. Its framework is grounded in «five core concepts»: adherence to sovereign equality, respect for international rule of law, commitment to multilateralism, a people-centred orientation,

and concrete action [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025a, 1 September]. In the self-assigned role as a «doer of global governance reform», China is accordingly tasked with deepening cooperation among BRICS countries and the «SCO family», while supporting mechanisms such as the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as institutions including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank of the BRICS countries, and the proposed SCO Development Bank [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 16 October]. By playing a crucial role in South-to-South cooperation, the plan casts China as a «builder of international fairness and justice» and as «a provider» of the «golden key» to solve global challenges [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 16 October]. Such self-identifications were reaffirmed in the context of the establishment of the Group of Friends of Global Governance, a coalition comprising 43 countries, which held its inaugural meeting at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters on 9 December 2025 at the level of Permanent Representatives. In its first joint declaration, the Group expressed concern over the persistent under-representation of the Global South and the erosion of international law, explicitly welcoming the Global Governance Initiative proposed by Xi Jinping [Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2025, 9 December].

Framed within the context of the UN's 80th anniversary, these recent developments manifest China's growing projection as a custodian of the international order inherited from the Second World War, aimed at legitimising Beijing's positions on sovereignty-related issues – most notably Taiwan – by grounding them in the core principles of the Westphalian order. At the same time, while unveiling the PRC's fourth global initiative at the SCO summit, Xi also urged member states to set an example in upholding the common values of humanity, announcing China's decision to provide humanitarian assistance to SCO countries, including the treatment of 500 patients with congenital heart disease, the performance of 5,000 cataract operations, and the implementation of 10,000 cancer screenings [State Council of the PRC 2025, 1 September]. Drawing on the Confucian discourse of «leading by example», Xi has increasingly claimed to perform a constructive and mediating role in international affairs, primarily pledging USD 100 million in humanitarian assistance to Palestine and expressing support for the Egypt- and Arab-led plan for restoring peace in Gaza, while also engaging in shuttle diplomacy between Thailand and Cambodia to help de-escalate bilateral tensions [‘How China engages’ 2026, 4 January]. These initiatives build on a longer-term expansion of the PRC's presence in regions affected by instability and conflict over the past two decades. A clear indicator of this evolution is the PRC's growing involvement in United Nations peacekeeping operations, where China now ranks as the second-largest financial contributor [United Nations Peacekeeping 2025a] and the eighth-largest contributor of troops and police personnel, with

1,877 deployed [United Nations Peacekeeping 2025b]. This engagement is complemented by voluntary contributions through instruments such as the Peace and Development Trust Fund and the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, as well as by a growing protagonism in post-conflict reconstruction in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Syria. On 20 October 2025, the launch of the International Organization for Mediation in Hong Kong, the world's first inter-governmental body dedicated to mediation, further signals the effort to institutionalise China's approach to peaceful dispute resolution [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 20 October]. Nonetheless, the expanding involvement and investment in peacekeeping and post-conflict operations have unfolded alongside a selective engagement in crisis mitigation.

In the case of the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, for instance, although Beijing reiterated its full support for «Pakistan's legitimate security concerns», its contribution remains limited [Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2025, 27 April]. Chinese claims of having facilitated de-escalation following Operation Sindoor were explicitly rejected by Indian government sources, which maintained that the ceasefire had been reached bilaterally without any third-party mediation [Jalali 2026, 1 January]. In the Middle East, meanwhile, Beijing reiterated its support for a two-state solution, advocating a «comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian question» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2023, 30 November]. However, this diplomatic positioning as a global peacemaker unfolded alongside the reaffirmation of the importance of sound Sino-Israeli relations, as well as increased demonstrations of enhanced military capability and state power.

In mid-March, China conducted joint naval drills with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman – marking the fifth consecutive year of trilateral cooperation – while renewing calls to revive negotiations under the Joint Cooperation Plan of Action framework. Although fewer than in 2024 (seven compared to eleven), joint exercises with Russia nonetheless signalled continued military coordination [von Essen 2025, 15 April]. At the same time, Iran hosted the first Shanghai Cooperation Organisation military exercise on its territory, the five-day «Sahand-2025» drill involving China, India, Russia and other SCO members. On 3 September 2025, two days after the conclusion of the SCO Summit in Tianjin, a large-scale military parade was held in Beijing on the occasion of the «80th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War». The parade served as a highly visible demonstration of China's growing military capabilities, featuring the unveiling of a new intercontinental ballistic missile, the DF-61, alongside systems equipped with hypersonic glide vehicles designed to evade missile defences. Together with a broad array of unmanned and directed-energy platforms, the full nuclear triad display unmistakably shed light on the PRC's expanding industrial and technological capacity, readily communicating to the world its ability

to materially sustain – and, if necessary, enforce – its vision of international order. In parallel, supporting China's longstanding claims of a «peaceful rise», in November, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) released a white paper titled «*China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era*», which reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to a defensive national policy, transparent and proportionate military spending, and a constructive role in international arms control [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 27 November]. The document also emphasised Beijing's ambition to assume leadership roles in global biosecurity governance and in emerging domains of international security, including outer space and cyberspace [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 27 November]. The launch of the Tianwen-2 mission in May 2025 – China's fastest and most precision-demanding deep-space probe to date – together with the continued operation and scientific expansion of the Tiangong space station through missions such as Tianzhou-9 and the Shenzhou-20 and -21 crewed flights, have further served as manifestations of the country's advancing capabilities in deep-space exploration and in emerging domains of international competition.

Set against these highly visible manifestations of its global power in material-capability terms, 2025 also marked a significant evolution of China's soft power projection, gaining traction through less institutionalised and more popular channels. In January, a short-lived ban on TikTok prompted millions of American users to migrate temporarily to the Chinese platform RedNote, where interactions between new and existing users generated unexpected forms of cultural exchange. In the cultural industries, the animated film *Ne Zha 2* achieved unprecedented box-office success both domestically and internationally, surpassing USD 2.14 billion in revenue and topping global animated film rankings [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 30 December]. Pop Mart's Labubu figurine became a global viral phenomenon, driving a sharp increase in profits and share value as international audiences and celebrity consumers embraced the character. Meanwhile, Chinese consumer brands continued to expand abroad, with coffee and tea chains such as Luckin, Chagee, and Mixue opening outlets in the United States (U.S.). Furthermore, the PRC's expanding visa-free travel policies to 48 countries, coupled with the establishment of new air routes and an increase in daily flight frequencies, have contributed to a steady increase in foreign visitors. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, the country's travel and tourism sector is projected in 2025 to make a record contribution of ¥ 13,7 trillion to the national economy – over 10 percent above pre-pandemic levels – while supporting more than 83 million jobs, including an estimated 1.3 million new positions created during the year ['China Surges Ahead' 2025, 30 April]. The winter sports industry has also emerged as a central vehicle for tourism attraction and international visibility [State Council of the PRC 2025, 2 February]. The year opened with

Harbin hosting the Ninth Asian Winter Games, bringing together people and leaders from across Asia and pledging to «deliver a spectacular sports gala for the world» [State Council of the PRC 2025, 7 February]. The Games witnessed a widening of participation, with Bhutan, Cambodia, and Saudi Arabia making their debut, while Afghanistan and Bahrain returned after having missed the 2017 edition [Kano 2025, 3 February]. Set in China's «Ice City», the Harbin Games contributed to strengthening the process of winter sports modernisation, notably accelerated by the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, and establishing China as a global sports power. The hosting of sports mega-events also played a significant role on the domestic front, serving as an instrument of national cohesion. The organisation of the Fifteenth National Games, staged jointly for the first time by Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, advanced the embedding of the «one country, two systems» framework within the sporting arena, promoting integration in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, among the most prominent technology clusters in the world. Alongside these more conventional events, the hosting of the 2025 World Humanoid Robot Games inaugurated the first-ever global competition of humanoid robotics. The event brought together 280 teams from 16 countries, including the United States, Germany, and Italy, showcasing advances in intelligent decision-making and serving as a venue for international exchange among robotics researchers and engineers, thereby underscoring the Chinese leaderships' concerted efforts to advance China's global positioning as a science and technological superpower [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 18 August].

In this sense, in 2025, 13 Chinese universities ranked among the world's top 200, while 346 institutions were included in the top 2,000, surpassing U.S. institutions for the first time [QS Top Universities 2025]. The growing international competitiveness of Chinese universities has been accompanied by sustained efforts to internationalise China's higher education system. On 11 April, at the opening ceremony of the 2025 China Study Abroad Forum and China International Education Exhibition Tour in Beijing, the World Study Tour Alliance was officially launched – an initiative aimed at integrating high-quality educational resources from universities and institutions worldwide, with nearly 40 Chinese and international universities participating [‘Connecting with the World’ 2025]. According to Springer Nature [‘Global Research Pulse’ 2024], China has also become the largest contributor to global research output and has advanced to the 10th position in the global innovation index by the World Intellectual Property Organization [‘Global Innovation Index’ 2025]. In this context, the introduction of the K-Visa (Young Science and Technology Talent Visa), effective from October 2025, has formalised mechanisms for attracting foreign scientific talents, supporting China's ambition to position itself as a global hub for talent and innovation by 2030 [State Council of the PRC 2021, 29 September]. However, evidence suggests that the PRC is, at present, still

unable to compete on an equal footing with the United States in attracting top-tier international talent, particularly in cases where they lack pre-existing academic, professional, or personal ties to China [Groenewegen-Lau & Hinaidi 2024]. Structural constraints to international mobility go hand in hand with critical international perceptions of the country.

While public views of China have become more favourable since 2024 in 15 of the 25 countries surveyed by the Pew Research Center, majorities continue to express limited confidence in Xi Jinping's ability to «do the right thing» in world affairs, even though confidence in him has increased in 16 of the 25 cases [Silver et al. 2025, 15 July]. This variation in perceptions highlights the heightened importance of diplomacy, and particularly public diplomacy, as a central site of global role-making. It is precisely through this domain that China seeks to manage the tensions between its expanding material capabilities and the persistent limits of its international reputation, long captured by Shambaugh's [2013] characterisation of «Global China» as a «partial power». This renders Role Theory-informed analysis of the PRC's foreign policy behaviour particularly revealing for understanding how it navigates national conceptions and external expectations vis-à-vis its global rise.

3. *Mapping the year's «Xiplomacy»*³

2025 witnessed the enactment of China's multiple and overlapping national role conceptions: a stabiliser in regional and economic crises; the voice and the natural representative of the Global South; a responsible major power building international fairness and justice; and a reformer of global governance. It is against this multi-layered constellation of self-identifications that Xi's diplomacy throughout the year must be understood. 2025 unfolded as a year of re-intensified global diplomatic exposure for China, marked by Xi Jinping's four foreign trips to six countries and participation in seven major international meetings [China's Diplomacy in the New Era 2025]. In comparative perspective, while the pre-pandemic years (2013-2019) were characterised by frequent and geographically extensive overseas travel (an average of approximately 15 high-level overseas visits per year), the 2021-2022 period saw a marked contraction in physical diplomacy, with summit participation largely conducted online. Following the gradual reopening observed in 2023 and the dense diplomatic calendar of 2024, 2025 signals continuity in this trajectory, albeit in a more regionally focused configuration [China's Diplomacy in the New Era 2025]. Such diplomatic regional engagement unfolded alongside renewed trade frictions with Washington,

3. For an overview on the so-called «Xiplomacy» over the past decade see Wulzer et al. 2025.

initially imposing a 10% punitive duty on goods imported from China, citing fentanyl-related concerns. Beijing, in turn, adopted a set of countermeasures targeting U.S. businesses and introducing retaliatory levies of 15% on U.S. coal and liquefied natural gas, and 10% on crude oil and selected automobiles. The escalation intensified in early April, when President Trump further raised tariffs on Chinese imports to 125%, from 84%, prompting expanded retaliatory duties from the Chinese side, tightening export controls on rare earths and dual-use materials, and issuing travel warnings to its citizens regarding the U.S. [Lee & Bu 2025, 25 November]. These developments heightened uncertainty across global supply chains, particularly in Southeast Asia.

It was in this context of heightened global economic uncertainty that, between 14 and 18 April, President Xi undertook state visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia – his first overseas trip of the year – during which a record total of 108 cooperation documents were signed across sectors ranging from infrastructure and the digital economy to green development. The Southeast Asian tour was preceded by Xi Jinping's meeting with representatives of the international business community at the Great Hall of the People in late March. Attended by more than forty foreign business leaders and representatives of business councils, the event reaffirmed China's role as a «major contributor to and anchor of stability for global growth for many years», now transitioning towards an innovation-driven development model centred on developing «new quality productive forces» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 28 March]. This positioning was further cemented during the three-hour meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in Beijing on 11 April and, shortly after, on 24 April, by talks with Kenyan President William Ruto. During the meeting with Sánchez, Xi explicitly called on China and the European Union (EU) to jointly defend globalisation and oppose what he described as «unilateral acts of bullying» [Cash & Latona 2025, 11 April]. The visit illustrated the challenge facing Spain, as well as most European countries, of deepening engagement with China while remaining responsive to EU-level concerns, particularly those related to persistent trade imbalances.

Likewise, in subsequent talks with President Ruto, China's self-identification as a stabilising actor for the Global South in the context of an increasingly volatile international environment was explicitly endorsed by the Kenyan President. The visit culminated in the signing of twenty cooperation agreements covering the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), high technology, trade, media, and people-to-people exchanges [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 24 April]. The relevance of President William Ruto's visit was also highlighted in the *List of the Outcomes of the Implementation of the Follow-up Actions of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation*, issued in the context of the Changsha meeting convened to advance the implementation of the 2024 FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation)

Summit outcomes, which ushered in the construction of an «all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future for the new era». [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025a, 11 June]. The meeting reviewed progress achieved since the summit, marking the opening of a new phase of China-Africa cooperation as FOCAC entered its twenty-fifth anniversary year, and resulting in the release of the *China-Africa Changsha Declaration on Upholding Solidarity and Cooperation of the Global South*. Within the declaration, China-Africa cooperation is explicitly framed against ongoing disruptions to the international economic and trade order, with criticism directed at U.S. tariff practices justified in the name of «reciprocity» and instead imposing disproportionate costs on developing economies [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025b, 11 June]. Among the most consequential measures adopted in Changsha was China's commitment, first announced in 2024, to extend duty-free market access to goods from 53 African countries, additionally granting least developed African countries enhanced market access measures to boost trade in goods, strengthen skills and technical training, and expand the promotion of high-quality products. In this sense, the New Development Bank has emerged – in Xi's words during his visit to the headquarters on 29 April 2025 – as a «rising force in the international financial system and a shining example of Global South collaboration», with the institution set to embark on a «second golden decade» of high-quality development, as BRICS cooperation itself enters a more mature phase [State Council of the PRC 2025, 29 April].

At the BRICS Ministers of Foreign Affairs and International Relations Meeting held in Rio de Janeiro in April 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi framed the group as standing «at the forefront of the Global South», emphasising both its demographic and economic weight and its normative responsibility to act as a counterweight to hegemonism, unilateralism, and protectionism, with China positioned as the natural representative of this collective identity [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 30 April]. However, such a self-projection was accompanied by significant symbolic developments later in the year. For the first time since assuming office, President Xi Jinping was absent from the annual BRICS leaders' summit held in Rio, with Premier Li Qiang representing China in his stead. The absence immediately generated speculation among observers, some of whom interpreted it as a signal of declining Chinese commitment to the grouping or even as evidence of BRICS' gradual erosion. Such interpretations were further reinforced in light of Vladimir Putin's decision not to attend the meeting in person, as well as by the prominence accorded to India in the handover of the BRICS rotating presidency amid persistently fragile Sino-Indian relations – marked by Indian accusations regarding China's support for Pakistan and New Delhi's refusal, only weeks earlier, to endorse a joint communiqué at the SCO defence ministers' meeting hosted by Beijing [Reuters 2025, 26 June]. Whilst most observers agree that within the

BRICS framework members have increasingly relied on China to leverage their international positioning rather than the reverse [Glosny 2010], they also concur that BRICS functions as an arena through which the Chinese leadership leverages the grouping itself as an extension of its long-standing self-ascribed role as a voice and representative of the developing world. Interpreting Xi's absence as indicative of disengagement, therefore, risks overlooking the intellectual infrastructure sustaining China's diplomatic role identity. On a more pragmatic note, Xi had met President Lula twice within the preceding year – first at the G20 summit and subsequently at the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum. But more significantly, Xi's absence from the Rio summit coincided with the President's inspection tour in Chinese Shanxi Province, where he visited a monument square commemorating the martyrs of the Hundred-Regiment Campaign (1940-1941), paying tribute to the Eighth Route Army and China's resistance against Japanese aggression. Addressing visiting students, he called on younger generations to carry forward the revolutionary legacy and the task of «national rejuvenation». During the same visit, Xi also inspected an important company, the Yangquan Valve Co., where he reiterated the strategic relevance of comprehensive reform in resource-based economies, calling for the transformation of the coal sector from low-end extraction toward higher-value production. In light of these events, Xi's summit absence appears to suggest that the forging of China's global role is inseparable from processes of domestic consolidation, particularly the strengthening of cultural and historical confidence at home. Xi's Shanxi tour, in other words, sheds light on the political and symbolic weight attached to 3 September 2025, marking the eightieth anniversary of the victory of the «Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War».

Notably, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) occupies a foundational place in the collective memory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), representing the ultimate triumph achieved through the collective sacrifice of the Chinese people under its leadership. The imperative to «tell the story of the War well» (*jiang hao kangzhan gushi* 讲好抗战故事) has thus increasingly served to strengthen the CCP's leadership at home and frame contemporary international tensions as a continuation of past struggles, reinforcing the claim that China stands on the right side of history and on the side of international fairness and justice [Central Government PRC 2025, 29 August]. This message was visually staged during Victory Day as helicopters flying above the military parade carried banners declaring «Justice shall prevail», «Peace shall prevail», and «People shall prevail», framing China's rise as just and inevitable despite Western containment efforts [State Council of the PRC 2025, 3 September]. Despite the decline in the number of attending foreign leaders from thirty in 2015 to twenty-six, the parade's symbolic choreography – and most notably the alignment of Xi

Jinping with Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, the first North Korean leader to attend a Chinese military parade since 1959 – unmistakably projected China's leadership blueprint within an emerging post-Western order. While consolidating its confrontational positioning vis-à-vis the U.S. amid Donald Trump's accusations that Beijing and its partners were conspiring against Washington [Gan et al. 2025, 3 September], the parade also assumed particular significance in the framing of Japan as an «adversarial Other».

A formal protest took place after *Kyodo News* reported that Japanese embassies had warned foreign governments against attending the Victory Day parade in Beijing, citing concerns over anti-Japanese undertones [Zhou 2025, 26 August]. These developments foregrounded a marked deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations, widely regarded as the most severe in over a decade, amid Japan's conservative turn under the government of Sanae Takaichi. Public statements by Japan's new Prime Minister framing a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan as an «existential threat» to Japan – thereby legitimising possible intervention by the Japan Self-Defense Forces – have fed into longstanding anti-Japanese sentiment in China, rooted in what Chinese historiography defines as the «Century of humiliation». In 2025, relations between the two neighbours appear to have reached a new low, increasingly characterised by measures with tangible economic consequences. In response to Takaichi's rhetoric, Beijing has indeed employed subtler but highly targeted forms of pressure. In November, Chinese authorities issued a travel advisory discouraging citizens from visiting Japan, officially justified on security grounds and explicitly linked to the Prime Minister's «erroneous statements» on Taiwan. Several Chinese airlines began offering refunds or free ticket changes, effectively lowering the practical costs of cancelling travel. Given Japan's growing reliance on inbound tourism, particularly from high-spending Chinese visitors, this targeted form of low-intensity economic coercion generated domestic pressure while avoiding escalation into a trade confrontation.

While ties with Japan hardened, China-U.S. relations in late 2025 experienced a gradual yet fragile thaw, symbolised by President Donald Trump's meeting with Xi Jinping in Busan in October – one of the most closely watched diplomatic encounters of the year. The talks yielded a limited trade truce: Washington agreed to ease selected tariff measures, while Beijing committed to resuming imports of U.S. soybeans, delaying the introduction of export controls on certain rare earth elements, and intensifying cooperation to curb illicit fentanyl trafficking. Although this stabilisation generated cautious optimism, it remained narrowly transactional and deliberately decoupled from high-sensitivity security issues, most notably Taiwan, which was absent from the agenda.

Overall, Xi's diplomatic trajectories in 2025 suggest that the multiplicity of global roles that Beijing simultaneously performed across issue areas, audiences, and contexts, rather than signalling inconsistency, reflects

an increasingly structured role conception of China as a global power. On 30 December 2025, at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, Wang Yi outlined the five main contributions of China's diplomacy over the course of the year, which largely correspond to the role identities discussed above: a stabiliser in regional and economic crises; the voice and the natural representative of the Global South; a responsible major power building international fairness and justice; and a reformer of global governance. In his speech, Wang Yi first depicted China as an «anchor of stability» in a world where peace is increasingly under threat; second as «a pillar» of its surrounding region, emphasising good-neighbourliness and regional cooperation; third, as a «defining force» amid transformations in the international order; fourth, as «a main engine» for global development in the face of mounting development challenges; and fifth, as a «steadying force» in defence of international justice and its foundational principles [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 30 December]. While these roles remain embedded in China's long-established national role conceptions – namely as a socialist state country, a developing country of the Global South, a civilisation-state, a responsible power, and a great power [Men 2014] – they nonetheless reflect its broadening toward a global role conception that asserts claims to centrality in global governance. Self-identifications such as «anchor», «pillar», «defining force», «main engine», and «steadying force» position the PRC as a gravitational centre around which stability, development, and order are expected to coalesce.

Among the key moments of China's annual diplomacy articulating these role identities was the 61st Munich Security Conference, where Wang Yi described the country as «a factor of certainty in this multipolar system» and «a steadfast constructive force» in a changing world, embracing the notion of China as an «enabler» of global development [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 17 February]. Likewise, Xi Jinping's remarks at the Leaders Meeting on Climate and the Just Transition stressed that, regardless of how the world may change, China would neither slow its climate actions nor reduce its support for international cooperation [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 23 April].

Along with China's representation as a stable and central actor on the global stage is the unchanging identification as a member of the Global South: «No matter how the international landscape evolves, we in China will always keep the Global South in our heart, and maintain our roots in the Global South» – Xi reiterated at the BRICS Plus leaders' dialogue [State Council of the PRC 2025, 24 October]. Such a self-identification is deeply rooted in China's shared history of exploitation with other postcolonial nations, playing a crucial role in its affiliation with developing countries. However, it has continued to evolve from a «deliberate emphasis on national insecurity» rooted in national humiliation experienced during the Opium War towards a «deliberate emphasis on national confidence» [Callahan 2009].

This gradual rebalancing, grounded on the uniqueness of China's historical and cultural experience, enables Beijing to claim a distinctive role in advocating greater «representation» (*daibiaoxing* 代表性) and «voice» (*fayanyuan* 发言权) for developing countries on the global stage, projecting itself as a leading economic model for future development paths of developing countries. Among other venues, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in South Korea, Xi Jinping reiterated China's identity as «an ideal, safe and promising destination for global investors», stressing that partnering with China means «embracing opportunities», «being optimistic about tomorrow», and ultimately «investing in the future» [State Council of the PRC 2025, 31 October]. The equation of China as the «future» reflects – to borrow from Callahan's (2009) words – its characterisation as a «pessimist nation»: an identity shaped by the interplay of pride and grievance, where national security concerns are deeply rooted in historical insecurities, yet coexist with optimism grounded in the success of its development path and civilisational grandeur. As the title of a signed article by Xi Jinping makes clear – *Learning from History to Build Together a Brighter Future*, published in the Russian Gazette ahead of his state visit to Russia for the celebrations marking the 80th anniversary of the Victory in the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War – it is China's role as guardian of historical memory that allows it to forge a brighter future for humanity [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 7 May].

The past-future dimension of China's self-identification as a great power is best condensed in the notion of a «strong country/power» (*qiangguo* 强国), a status consistently framed in Xi's political discourse not as attained but as an aspirational and non-deferrable objective, articulated across multiple domains – from technology and education to culture, trade, and space. This vision of a «strong China» closely relies on the strength of the Party leadership, repeatedly emphasised by Xi, also for the New Year's address, as the indispensable condition for national rejuvenation [State Council of the PRC 2025, 31 December]. Central to this process is the study and education program aimed at fully implementing the Party's leadership and government conduct. It is not incidental that 2025 opened with the launch of a Party-wide education campaign aimed at reinforcing the implementation of the central leadership's eight-point decision on improving conduct, a fact listed by the State Council Information Office among the top ten news stories that defined China in 2025 [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 30 December]. Framed as a corrective against bureaucracy, formalism, hedonism, and extravagance, the campaign underscored the leadership's emphasis on discipline, institutional rectification, and governing capacity as foundational to national strength. At the same time, the release in early January of the «blueprint for building a strong education system by 2035» highlighted the centrality of education modernisation to this process [State Council of the PRC 2025, 20 January].

Viewed through China's self-conception as a strong global power, the Asian continent emerged in 2025 as the central arena of Xi's diplomacy and, increasingly, as the primary stage on which major-power interaction unfolded. Asia's growing salience as a diplomatic hub was further reflected in the sequencing of high-level summits. The second China-Central Asia Summit, held in Astana in June, followed the first-ever EU-Central Asia Summit convened in Samarkand, attended by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa. Likewise, the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union was marked in Beijing at the 25th EU-China Summit, providing a platform to address bilateral relations alongside geopolitical issues, most notably the war in Ukraine. As noted above, the year's most closely watched episode of China's «major-country diplomacy» (*daguo waijiao* 大国外交) – the first meeting in six years between Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump – took place in Busan in October and was followed shortly thereafter by Xi's visit to the Republic of Korea, during which the two sides reaffirmed their strategic cooperative partnership. This diplomatic momentum carried into early 2026 with the visit of South Korean President Lee Jae-myung – an encounter iconically crystallised by the leaders' selfie.

4. China's neighbourhood diplomacy in 2025: a regional arena of global role-making

At the Central Conference on Work Related to Neighbouring Countries, held from 8 to 9 April 2025, Xi Jinping systematically reviewed the achievements and accumulated experience of China's «neighbourhood diplomacy in the new era», reaffirming the strategic centrality of its surrounding states [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 9 April]. Neighbouring areas were described as a vital foundation for development and prosperity, a key front for safeguarding national security, and a priority arena for managing overall diplomacy. Crucially, the conference emphasised that work related to neighbouring countries can no longer be viewed in purely regional terms. Instead, it must be approached from a global perspective, reflecting the entry of China's neighbourhood into a critical phase of deep interlinkage between regional dynamics and broader transformations in the international system. This was readily visible from the very beginning of the year, with the Ninth Asian Winter Games held in Harbin bringing together heads of state and official representatives from the region, thus providing the backdrop for a dense round of head-of-state diplomacy. Xi Jinping held in fact separate meetings with the leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Brunei, and Thailand, indeed, using the occasion to advance cooperation agendas spanning emerging technologies, regional connectivity, development corridors, and

security coordination [CGTN 2025, 8 February]. Under the theme «Dream of Winter, Love among Asia», the Games aimed at creating a «new bond linking the city (Harbin) and the world» while bringing new vitality to co-operation across the continent, presenting Asia as the «convergence» of the world's diverse civilisations contributing to an «equal and orderly multipolar world» [Xi 2025, 7 February].

Against this backdrop, Xi Jinping's first overseas visits of the year took him to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, forming a «Southeast Asia tour to cement neighbourly bonds, bolster regional cooperation» [State Council of the PRC 2025a, 14 April]. At the same time, as mentioned, the tour reflected China's effort to situate regional cooperation within a context of global uncertainty and systemic transformation, presenting Asia's cohesion and shared development as sources of stability and continuity.

In particular, the year marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Vietnam and was designated the China-Vietnam Year of People-to-People Exchanges. In this context, Xi Jinping's visit to Hanoi – his second in less than eighteen months – signals an effort to further consolidate bilateral ties, particularly in trade and supply chains, amid increasing pressures on global trade linked to U.S. tariff policies. The visit was indeed framed around the objective of jointly opposing «unilateral bullying», reinforcing China's self-presentation as a defender of a rules-based trade order, while casting the United States as the principal spoiler of the global trading system [State Council of the PRC 2025b, 14 April]. During the visit, the two sides signed 45 agreements of cooperation, including arrangements aimed at strengthening production and supply chains and advancing cooperation in railway development [Guarascio et al. 2025, 14 April]. Notably, Beijing secured Vietnam's approval for aircraft certified by the Chinese aviation regulator, paving the way for the potential operation of China-made passenger jets produced by the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), China's state-owned aircraft manufacturer, in the Vietnamese market. Additional agreements included a memorandum between the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which is responsible for issuing certificates of origin. Given its scale and diplomatic salience, the visit elicited a response from U.S. President Donald Trump, who characterised the China-Vietnam engagement as being driven by efforts to «screw the US» [Liang 2025, 15 April].

Malaysia constituted the second leg of Xi Jinping's Southeast Asia tour and marked his second visit to the country as head of state. The timing of the visit was significant, following the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2024 and preceding Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025, thereby reaffirming China-ASEAN coordination as central to regional stability. The visit concluded with the *Joint Statement on Building a High-level Strategic Malaysia-China Community with a Shared Future*, which re-

affirmed Malaysia's commitment to the One-China Policy and underscored both sides' support for ASEAN centrality, including the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the objective of concluding a substantive Code of Conduct by 2026 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia 2025, 17 April]. The two sides also aligned their positions on international issues, including Gaza, and reiterated support for multilateral cooperation within the United Nations framework. Economically, cooperation focused on deepening integration across industrial, supply, value, data, and talent chains, with priority areas identified in the digital, green, blue, and tourism economies. The visit reaffirmed support for the Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation Plan signed in 2024, alongside commitments to enhance connectivity through projects such as the East Coast Rail Link, rail-sea transportation corridors, and the development of a seamless Air Silk Road between China and ASEAN. Chinese enterprises were encouraged to participate in Malaysia's 5G network development, while cooperation was further expanded through joint research projects, science and technology exchanges, and the implementation of the Bilateral Cultural Cooperation Agreement (2024-2029). During the visit, the two sides signed multiple cooperation documents covering areas including artificial intelligence, digital economy, trade in services, railways, agriculture, culture and tourism, and media, further embedding China-Malaysia relations within the framework of an «ASEAN-China community with a shared future».

Cambodia represented the final stop of Xi Jinping's visits and coincided with the designation of 2025 as the Cambodia-China Year of Tourism, described by both sides as the opening of a new chapter in the «iron-clad friendship» between the two countries [State Council Information Office of the PRC 2025, 13 April]. The visit concluded with the signing of 37 cooperation agreements spanning trade, infrastructure, education, energy, tourism, and strategic connectivity, and with the release of the *Joint Statement on Building an All-Weather Cambodia-China Community with a Shared Future in the New Era* [State Council of the PRC 2025, 18 April]. On the political front, Cambodia reiterated its position that issues related to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan constitute China's internal affairs. Economically, cooperation centred on the implementation of the Diamond Cooperation Framework, with commitments to accelerate two flagship corridors – the Industrial and Technological Corridor and the Fish and Rice Corridor – aimed at advancing Cambodia's industrialisation and agricultural modernisation. China reaffirmed support for the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, encouraging greater participation by Chinese enterprises to promote industrial development in Preah Sihanouk province. Additional large-scale commitments included backing for the Funan Techo Integrated Water Resources Management Project and plans for a power plant in Koh Kong. The visit also addressed cooperation on security-related issues, with an emphasis

on human security and support for Cambodia's goal of becoming free of mines and explosive remnants of war.

Overall, Xi's visits took place at a moment when Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam and Cambodia, were subject to some of the highest initial U.S. tariff rates – 46 and 49 percent respectively – opening space for China to cast itself as a more reliable partner than Washington [Zhang 2025, 8 July]. As Xi's Southeast Asia tour showed China navigating and capitalising on trade turbulence generated by the tariff war, the same approach was also evident in the soft reset of its relationship with India. On the sidelines of the SCO summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Xi Jinping in Beijing, marking his first visit to China in seven years following the violent clashes in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, in which at least twenty Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops were killed. The meeting took place after the relative stabilisation of the long-disputed Himalayan border and only days after the United States imposed a 50 percent tariff on Indian exports. The encounter produced several concrete outcomes, including agreements to resume direct passenger flights, reopen three designated border trade passes – Lipulekh, Shipki La, and Nathu La – facilitate visas and pilgrimage routes, and deepen economic engagement. Beyond these measures, the meeting was significant for the mutual redefinition of their respective international roles in relation to one another. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China and India as «development partners rather than competitors» who «should build mutual trust rather than suspicion» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 14 July]. A reframing, however, that remains inherently fragile, as Chinese support for Pakistan, particularly in the May 2025 conflict, has clearly demonstrated. To be sure, the initial steps toward a rapprochement between India and China predated Trump's second term; nonetheless, the meeting functioned as a partial response to Trump's tariff escalation, offering China the opportunity to project itself as a predictable and engaged actor bringing «more benefits» (*huiji* 惠及) in spaces where U.S. policy has generated uncertainty and power vacuums.

The Second China-Central Asia Summit in Astana, when Xi Jinping and the leaders of the five Central Asian states signed the Astana Declaration and a landmark treaty on «eternal good-neighbourliness, friendship, and cooperation», should also be understood in this global perspective [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 17 June]. The summit produced twelve cooperation agreements covering Belt and Road cooperation, trade facilitation, connectivity, green minerals, industry, customs, and people-to-people exchanges, alongside multiple sister-city agreements that brought the total number of such partnerships to over one hundred. The event was ultimately presented as a step toward building a closer «community with a shared future» resisting unilateralism, protectionism and promoting a fair international order. It is precisely in its stance against what it frames as US hegemonic politics that China's neighbourhood diplomacy has assumed in-

creasing centrality to its global role-making. This renewed emphasis reflects a deeper evolution China's national role conception toward its neighbours that began around 2013, when Beijing increasingly came to view itself as responsible actor not only for engaging its neighbourhood but for actively stabilising and harmonising «the periphery». This posture, however, builds on a much longer-standing worldview in which China's periphery has occupied a central place. Historically, the hierarchical tributary order of East Asia has provided a fertile – if contested – analytical terrain for explaining the relative stability of relations between a powerful Chinese polity and its smaller neighbours. It is within this historical and conceptual lineage that neighbourhood diplomacy emerges as a foundational component of China's contemporary global role conception, and increasingly as the primary site of its contestation.

The contested nature of China's relations with its neighbours was particularly visible in the South China Sea, where frictions between China and the Philippines intensified. Beijing's increasingly assertive posture relying on «grey zone» coercive practices ushered a series of close encounters and collisions involving coast guard and naval vessels – including incidents near Thitu Island and Scarborough Shoal – with both sides accusing the other of dangerous manoeuvres and provocation. By year's end, confrontations had expanded to affect civilian fishing activities, illustrating how China's neighbourhood diplomacy and the global role it seeks to enact through it continue to encounter sustained resistance by its most «close Others».

5. «*Re-orienting*» major-country diplomacy

A paradigm shift in the geopolitics of major power diplomacy became increasingly visible in 2025. Asia consolidated its position as a central arena for major power interaction, hosting a growing share of head-of-states exchanges and reflecting what could be defined as a «re-orientation» of modern diplomacy. Serving as a diplomatic hub and performative space through which China's global roles have been articulated and negotiated, in 2025, Beijing gained a structurally advantageous position as host, convener, and agenda-setter of the very terms under which global diplomatic interaction unfolded.

Among the many manifestations of this «re-orientation», the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, held in Beijing in May 2025, was particularly indicative. The newly adopted Action Plan moved indeed beyond a narrow focus on sectoral cooperation, outlining instead a framework for strategic partnership articulated in civilisational terms. Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening exchanges and cooperation in the field of cultural heritage, including joint archaeological projects, the conservation and restoration of ancient and historic sites, and enhanced

collaboration among museums. Education and capacity-building constitute a central pillar of the plan's agenda, with China committing to provide CELAC member states with 3,500 government scholarships, 10,000 training opportunities in China, 500 International Chinese Language Teachers Scholarships, 300 training opportunities for poverty-reduction professionals, and 1,000 funded placements under the Chinese Bridge program. Measures facilitating mobility – most notably the introduction of visa exemptions for selected Latin American and Caribbean countries – were designed to further reinforce people-to-people connectivity [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 14 May]. Alongside these initiatives, the Action Plan reaffirmed China's opposition to power politics and external interference, reiterating its support for Latin American and Caribbean countries in safeguarding independence and sovereignty. This position was echoed in Xi Jinping's bilateral engagement with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on the sidelines of the Moscow commemorations marking the eightieth anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, during which Xi reaffirmed China's firm support for Venezuela's sovereignty and stability [State Council of the PRC 2025, 10 May].

It was precisely in the context of the commemorations that the China-Russia relationship was elevated by Beijing as a paradigmatic example of contemporary major-country relations. Framed as a «role model» for great-power diplomacy, the partnership was performatively reaffirmed through a series of events, such as joint Chinese-Russian naval exercises, including submarine operations reportedly transiting the Tsushima Strait between Japan and South Korea, as well as annual joint exercises with Iran in the Gulf of Oman. Military coordination was at the centre of mounting international accusations regarding China's support for Russia's war in Ukraine, including direct public criticism from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, urging it to take a more proactive stance in the conflict. Most notably, President Trump in Busan urged Xi Jinping to press Moscow to bring the war to an end, and French President Emmanuel Macron voiced similar expectations during his visit in China amid increasingly strained EU-China relations.

The evolution of EU-China relations – and the negotiation of their respective international roles – also found its diplomatic stage in China, particularly at the 25th EU-China Summit held in Beijing on 24 July. Convened at a moment of heightened strain in bilateral relations, and coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic ties, the meeting was dominated by concerns over persistent trade imbalances, market access, and the war in Ukraine. EU representatives underlined what they described as an inflection point in EU-China economic ties, pressing Beijing to take concrete steps to improve access for European firms in priority sectors such as agri-food, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals, and calling for an end to retaliatory trade defence measures affecting EU exports, including brandy, pork,

and dairy products. The European side also raised concerns over China's export controls on rare earths and permanent magnets, the lack of reciprocity in the digital domain, persistent uncertainties surrounding data security and cross-border data flows, and alleged malicious cyber activities attributed to Chinese sources. Beyond economic issues, the summit addressed a range of political and security questions, including human rights in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, developments in the Taiwan Strait, and rising tensions in the East and South China Seas. While both sides issued a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to climate cooperation, the summit yielded limited tangible outcomes. Instead, it reflected the European Union's growing confrontation with structural constraints in its economic and geopolitical relationship with China, reinforcing the need for a more pragmatic and security-oriented approach to engagement with its eastern counterpart. As said, the year concluded with the state visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Beijing, which both sides characterised as constructive, and during which multiple agreements were signed in key sectors, including nuclear energy, agri-food production, education, and environmental cooperation. On the economic front, Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's commitment to expanding domestic demand and maintaining openness, signalling readiness to increase imports of French products and to facilitate a greater presence of French firms in the Chinese market. Macron, for his part, emphasised the importance of ensuring a fair and non-discriminatory environment for Chinese companies operating in France, a position that partially diverged from the more restrictive trajectory of recent EU policies toward China, particularly amid Chinese retaliatory measures affecting emblematic French exports such as cognac. The continuation of the visit in Chengdu, accompanied by informal engagements, may be interpreted as a sign of the growing role of personal diplomacy within the so-called «Xiplo-macy». More than that, however, it may signal a paradigmatic shift that sees China as the focal point of contemporary high-level diplomacy, with Beijing functioning as «unavoidable Other» through which major powers and Global South actors alike seek to advance economic agendas and find responses to global uncertainty.

6. *Conclusions*

Across 2025, China's foreign policy was best understood by this article as a project of global role consolidation and negotiation. The year's diplomatic engagements – from the launch of the Global Governance Initiative at the SCO summit to the dense sequencing of high-level encounters in Beijing and across Asia – revealed a state intent on shaping the terms, venues, and narratives through which China's international positioning is performed and understood. Read through the lens of Role Theory, China's conduct in

2025 appears as a sustained effort to stabilise a national role conception of «Global China», while navigating the frictions generated by external and internal expectations. A central claim of this article has been that Asia was not merely the main theatre of Xi's diplomacy, but the space in which China's global role was most visibly relocated and tested. Neighbourhood diplomacy functioned simultaneously as a platform for regional stabilisation and integration, a lever for managing economic turbulence generated by Trump's tariff politics, and a site where China's desired global role encountered both acceptance and persistent pushback, most starkly in the South China Sea. In this sense, 2025 underscored a core tension at the heart of «Global China»: the ambition to act as an anchor of stability and a convening centre for the non-Western world, alongside the reality that the neighbourhood remains the primary arena in which that role is most directly shaped and challenged. The analysis has shown that China's global role-making in 2025 operated through a layered self-identification of «Global China» as a reformer of global governance, a provider of «solutions» for the Global South and to global uncertainty, and a responsible and moral stakeholder committed to global stability, free trade and development. This multilayered role identity particularly emerges from the alter-casting of the United States as an increasingly destabilising force within the international system and Japan as an adversarial, assertive Other.

Looking ahead to 2026, and particularly the implementation of the 15th Five-Year Plan, it appears that «the next five years will see China opening its doors even wider» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025, 25 October]. Special emphasis is placed on shaping a «new model» of interaction with the United States, deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, sustaining relations with Europe, and strengthening the construction of a «community with a shared future» with neighbouring countries as a long-term priority, especially in light of China's role as host of APEC 2026. These engagements, however, will unfold under the shadow of near-term domestic benchmarks – above all 2027, a milestone for the People's Liberation Army's modernisation and a politically consequential year in the run-up to the Communist Party's 21st Party Congress, which will shape elite turnover and may raise the prospect of an unprecedented fourth term for Xi Jinping. The same horizon looms large for the modernisation of education, by which China aims to have built a high-quality education system in which loyalty to the Party, as the new year's high-level disciplinary investigations within the military and state apparatus suggest, is likely to be valued no less than professional competence. In this sense, China's self-characterisation as a strong technological, talent, cultural and moral power is poised to become a key driver of its global role-making in 2026, as the international system enters a phase of heightened geopolitical disorder – from the Middle East crisis around Iran to Venezuela – alongside an increasingly contested U.S. global role. If 2025 marked the moment in

which «Global China» crystallised both as an analytical category and a geo-political reality, the years ahead will constitute a critical test of its credibility and sustainability, ultimately hinging on Beijing's ability to deliver exemplary governance at home.

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