

China's Global Footprint: Economic Alignments, Media Narratives, and Regional Perceptions

Over the past decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a central actor in reshaping the global order. Its ascent has not only restructured patterns of trade, finance, and production but also transformed the cognitive and communicative infrastructures through which global power is perceived and contested. The [Volume 11, Issue 2 \(December 2025\)](#) of the *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* (CCPS) examines PRC's evolving global engagement across economic, political, and communicative domains. The articles featured in this issue analyse how China's trade realignments, media diplomacy, and public perceptions interact to shape its international legitimacy. Specifically, this issue forwards the **Perceptual Geo-economics** concept in probing into how China's economic strategies, media narratives, and public sentiments co-produce influence in diverse regional contexts. The framework integrates insights from international political economy, communication studies, and comparative perception analysis and situates China's international behaviour within the intersection of structural transformation and meaning-making.

This CCPS issue features four articles: the first article by Valdiglesias, *"Rewiring Global Value Chains: Friendshoring, Nearshoring, and the Politics of Supply Chain Realignment in the United States-China Trade War,"* offers an econometric analysis of how the United States (US)–China trade conflict restructured trade flows across Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) member economies from 2013 to 2022. Using a random-effects panel data model, Valdiglesias demonstrates that geographic proximity (nearshoring) and strategic political alignment (friendshoring) jointly influence export performance during periods of geopolitical tension. Countries like Mexico and Vietnam gained most from production relocations, while the US and China continued to anchor global value chains (GVCs) as central hubs. Theoretically, the study builds upon and extends classical trade models by introducing political trust and strategic risk as new determinants of trade. Valdiglesias concludes that in an era of uncertainty, friendshoring functions as a form of economic risk management, where trust and alliance supplant pure cost efficiency; second,

Duishekeeva et al.'s "*Mediating Power: Media Frames and the Representation of China–Central Asia Relations in Kyrgyzstan*" analysed how Kyrgyz media construct narratives around China's political and diplomatic activities. Drawing on data from *Vecherniy Bishkek* between January and June 2023, the authors find that China's image in Kyrgyzstan oscillates between optimism and caution. The newspaper's reporting largely emphasizes political cooperation, infrastructure projects, and regional stability, consistent with the Chinese narrative of "win-win" development. However, latent frames of dependency, inequality, and transparency concerns persist. The authors situate these patterns within a broader regional context—post-Soviet nation-building, limited media freedom, and the struggle to balance relations among great powers. The study, thus, demonstrates how media framing both reflects and shapes the political geography of Central Asia; third, the "*Soft Power from the Newsroom: Media Diplomacy and Cultural Narratives of China in Kyrgyzstan*" by Liu et al. extends Duishekeeva et al.'s work by incorporating a three-year longitudinal analysis (2020–2022) of Kyrgyz media coverage on China. Employing content analysis and comparative methods, the study identifies the growing prevalence of neutral or positive tones in reporting. Around 81.82 per cent of the sample suggests a deliberate attempt to maintain diplomatic balance. The study underscores that Kyrgyz media serve not only as information channels but also as agents of public diplomacy. By foregrounding China's contributions to infrastructure, health cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the press performs a *mediating* function between state interests and public sentiment. Nevertheless, Liu et al. acknowledge tensions between official optimism and public ambivalence, indicating that media narratives can both consolidate and complicate soft power; and lastly, Rifawan, Karalekas, and Hardiawan's "*Perceiving China Across Continents: Comparative Attitudes in Indonesia and Hungary toward China's Global Role*" introduces a comparative perceptual dimension. Using a survey data analysed through the *Rasch Model*, they examined how university students in Indonesia and Hungary perceive China's influence in development, democracy, and geopolitics. In this study they found out that Indonesians express economic appreciation but with political caution, viewing China as an indispensable trade partner yet distrusting its authoritarian governance model. However, Hungarian students display greater skepticism, aligning more closely with Western democracies and perceiving China as politically intrusive despite strong governmental cooperation. Here, the findings imply that China's image is contingent not on its economic presence

alone but on how local historical, cultural, and political contexts interpret that presence.

These papers reflect the multidimensional nature of China's rise. They argue that China's global presence today is not defined by domination or isolation but by "*mutual entanglement*"—an interdependence that is simultaneously economic, narrative, and perceptual. Hence, it can be argued further that Beijing's influence emerges not merely from its economic might but from the interplay of structural, discursive, and perceptual forces. These forces are integrated, specifically, as dimensions of *perceptual geo-economics*.

Structural Dimension: Reordering Global Production. Valdiglesias' analysis captures how trade tensions between the United States (US) and China have ushered in a fragmented yet interdependent production system. Economies like Vietnam, Mexico, and Malaysia exemplify adaptive insertion into new value chains. China's position, though challenged, remains pivotal. The decoupling process is therefore selective and partial. A recalibration rather than a retreat.

Discursive Dimension: Media as Infrastructure of Influence. Duishekeeva et al. and Liu et al. demonstrate that the media function as the connective tissue of China's soft power architecture. Through media collaboration and strategic communication, China seeks to normalise its presence and cultivate legitimacy. However, media narratives are never unidirectional; they are refracted through domestic political contexts, press freedoms, and audience expectations. This interplay generates a hybrid narrative space, where cooperation and skepticism coexist.

Perceptual Dimension: Legitimacy and Trust. Rifawan, Karalekas, and Hardiawan highlight perception as the currency of legitimacy. Even in states where China wields substantial economic leverage, such as Indonesia or Hungary, public attitudes may diverge sharply from elite policy. These findings remind us that global influence depends not only on transactional benefits but also on trust, empathy, and shared norms.

1. Theoretical Implications

The integration of these studies suggests an evolution in the concept of geo-economics. Traditional geo-economics¹² focuses on how the states use economic tools for strategic aims. The present evidence suggests perceptual power—defined as the capacity to shape how economic and political actions are

understood, justified, or resisted—as a parallel domain. Thus, it is proposed that geo-economic analysis needs to expand by also looking at how states construct and contest perceptions of economic power.

Collectively, the four papers observe that China's deployment of perceptual power operates through:

- *Economic Narratives*, framing trade and investment as mutually beneficial partnerships rather than domination;
- *Cultural Diplomacy*, promoting linguistic and educational exchanges that humanize China's global role; and
- *Media Collaboration*, crafting informational ecosystems that privilege developmental success over controversy.

However, perceptual power is inherently unstable. It is dependent on local interpretive communities. As seen in the Indonesian and Hungarian cases, the same Chinese initiatives can evoke divergent reactions depending on historical memory and political culture.

The emerging scholarship on China's international behaviour calls for an integrated analytical approach: that is by combining international political economy, media and communication studies, and comparative social psychology. Only through such synthesis can we capture the full complexity of China's global transformation.

2. Regional Contrasts and Global Convergences

While the economic logic of interdependence is universal, the meanings attached to China's rise vary, from pragmatic accommodation in Asia to normative scepticism in Europe and cautious opportunism in the Global South. These regional patterns illustrate how material interests and perceptual politics converge, producing differentiated strategies of engagement, resistance, and adaptation to China's expanding footprint.

Asia: Pragmatic Acceptance and Strategic Hedging. In both Indonesia and Central Asia, China's presence is met with pragmatic acceptance rather than ideological opposition. Economic cooperation is valued, yet concerns about dependency, transparency, and cultural sovereignty persist. Such ambivalence reflects a broader Asian pattern of strategic hedging, where states seek to benefit from Chinese investment while maintaining policy autonomy.

Europe: Normative Scepticism and Political Duality. Hungary represents the paradox of European engagement with China — elite alignment amid popular scepticism. While Orbán's government embraces Chinese investment as an alternative to Brussels' conditionalities, Hungarian citizens remain oriented toward Western democratic norms. This gap illustrates the limits of soft power when perception diverges from policy.

The Global South: Opportunity and Asymmetry. Valdiglesias' analysis reveals how APEC and developing economies navigate a double bind — leveraging new trade opportunities while avoiding overdependence. China's Belt and Road Initiative amplifies these dynamics by linking physical infrastructure with narratives of solidarity and "shared destiny." Yet, the sustainability of such ties rests on institutional transparency and reciprocal trust.

The articles featured in this issue portray a global order defined by the politics of perception. In an economic perspective, China remains deeply embedded in global production. In a communications point of view, PRC is a dominant narrative-maker. In perceptual terms, however, China's legitimacy is contingent and context-dependent. This underscores a fundamental shift in global politics. Power now resides not only in control of resources or technologies but in the capacity to shape meaning. The interplay of trade realignment, media framing, and public perception forms the foundation of *perceptual geo-economics*, to understand the transformation of global power relations.

As the boundaries between economy, communication, and culture continue to blur, the sustainability of China's global influence will depend not merely on its capacity to build infrastructures and supply chains but on its ability to build trust and shared understanding across a deeply differentiated world.

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1. Geo-economics entered the lexicon in 1990 with an article by Edward Luttwak, which argued that following the Cold War, the importance of military power was giving way to geo-economic power.
2. The ultimate goal of geoeconomics is the “conquest or protection of desirable roles in the world economy” (Luttwak, 1993) with an important role of large companies used by the states as instruments for geo-economic purposes.

References

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