

Multilevel Strategic Adaptations to China's Global Integration

The global political economy is on a structural transformation, transitioning from a United States (US)-centric paradigm toward a fragmented, multipolar reality. This [Volume 12 issue 1](#) of *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations* continues the journal's systematic exploration of these shifts, building directly upon the theoretical foundations established in our previous issues.

In Volume 11, No. 1 (2025), we introduced the Strategic-Relational Approach¹ (SRA) to examine how the Indo-Pacific's "strategically selective" structures privilege certain regional responses while constraining others. Volume 11, No. 2 (2025), expanded this into Perceptual Geo-economics, probing how China's economic strategies and media narratives co-produce influence². This current issue integrates these perspectives into a unified framework of **Multilevel Strategic Agency**, exploring how states, subnational provinces, and private firms exercise "strategic activism" to navigate the constraints of major-power rivalry.

Thematic Continuity: From Structure to Agency

While our previous issues focused on broad regional dynamics and cognitive infrastructures, this volume anchors these arguments into the tangible strategies of diverse actors.

Building on the SRA framework, [Dang Minh Duc et al.](#) and [Amna Khalid & Bakri Mat](#) analyse how Southeast Asian nations navigate the "sharp power" of China's infrastructure expansion and the "soft power" of the European Union's (EU) sustainable development initiatives. Vietnam and the Philippines, specifically, are shown utilising defensive realism to balance calibrated diplomacy with military modernization.

Parallel to our previous issue on perceptual geo-economics, [Lucy Anning](#) investigates how China's digital expansion in West Africa reshapes local digital economies. This highlights the dual nature of China's "Digital Silk Road." That is by empowering local small-scale enterprises while simultaneously creating new forms of technological dependence.

Shifting to the internal and corporate dimensions of strategic agency, [Jiandong Shi](#) demonstrates how Chinese firms are “re-embedding” in Europe to mitigate the risks of US-China trade tensions. Complementing this topic, [HongYing Li](#) provides a compelling case of subnational agency, showing how the “marginalised” province of Guizhou actively sought integration into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) despite being initially excluded from the national plan.

Theoretical Synthesis

The articles collectively argue that agency is not merely a reaction to external pressure but a proactive effort to create “strategic space”. Whether it is a firm diversifying its global portfolio or a marginalised province engaging in “subnational diplomacy,” the common thread is the pursuit of autonomy within a highly constrained global environment. By connecting these multilevel strategies to the broader structural shifts analysed in our earlier issues, Volume 12, Issue 1 (2026) provides a comprehensive map of the evolving global order, one where the interplay between structural selectivity and strategic agency remains the defining dialectic of our time.

The five featured articles in this issue illustrate how diverse actors navigate the “strategically selective” terrain of contemporary global relations.

National and Regional Geo-strategies

The first two articles explore how sovereign states in Southeast Asia manage the structural pressures of major-power competition through calibrated strategic responses.

“[Vietnam's Strategic Balancing in China-EU Competition in the Mekong Subregion](#)” by [Dang Minh Duc](#), [Nguyen Bich Thuan](#), and [Vu Thanh Ha](#) analyse the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) as a “confluence point” where China's “sharp power” (focused on infrastructure like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation) meets the EU's “soft power” (centred on governance and the “Global Gateway” strategy). They argue that while China dominates trade and infrastructure, the EU positions itself as a value-based partner, forcing downstream countries like Vietnam to balance these distinct developmental models to protect national interests such as water and food security.

Amna Khalid and Bakri Mat employed defensive realism in their paper, *“Vietnam and the Philippines’ Strategic Responses to China’s Maritime Assertiveness in South China Sea (2014-2025),”* to compare the maritime strategies of Vietnam and the Philippines from 2014 to 2025. Their findings highlight a divergence in agency: Vietnam emphasises “calibrated diplomacy” and military modernization within its “Four Nos” defence policy, whereas the Philippines increasingly relies on alliance partnerships (particularly with the US) and legal advocacy to counter China’s maritime assertiveness. They argue that regional stability depends on these states’ ability to strengthen resilience through “minilateral” cooperation and international law.

Digital Integration and Subnational Agency

The subsequent articles shift the focus to the transformative power of technology and the proactive role of subnational entities. *“The Digital Silk Road in West Africa: Empowerment, Dependence, and the Agency of Small-Scale Enterprises,”* written by Lucy Anning, investigates the impact of China’s digital expansion, noting that over 70 per cent of West Africa’s telecom infrastructure is now linked to Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE. Her findings show that while this integration empowers small-scale enterprises by providing affordable connectivity and e-commerce access, it simultaneously creates risks of technological dependence and data privacy concerns. She argues that sustainable digital development in the region requires balancing these external investments with robust local capacity-building and legal frameworks.

HongYing Li provides a unique look at internal Chinese dynamics by examining Guizhou—a province originally “marginalised” or unmentioned in the central government’s 2015 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) blueprint, in his paper *“Subnational Agency and the BRI: Guizhou’s Strategic Activism from the Periphery”*. Li argues that Guizhou did not passively accept this status but exercised “strategic activism” to create its own development opportunities. The finding that Guizhou successfully integrated into the BRI through positive central-local interaction suggests that provincial agency can effectively reshape national strategies from the bottom up.

Corporate Adaptation to Trade Frictions

The final article, “*The Impact of US-China Trade Tensions on Chinese Firms’ Investment in Europe*,” addresses the agency of the firm in response to global institutional shocks. [Jiandong Shi](#) empirically examines how US-China trade tensions have driven Chinese firms to reconfigure their international footprints toward Europe. Using data from 2004 to 2024, Shi finds that trade frictions act as an “exogenous shock” that significantly increases the likelihood of Chinese investment in the European market—a strategy he terms “market transfer”.

Notably, this shift is most pronounced among private, high-tech, and export-oriented firms, demonstrating how corporate actors proactively hedge against geopolitical risks by “re-embedding” themselves in more stable institutional environments.

Through these diverse studies, this issue demonstrates that regardless of their scale—whether a nation-state, a marginalised province, or a high-tech corporation, actors are increasingly utilising [Strategic Agency](#) to navigate and reshape the global order in their favour.

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Notes

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1. Strategic-Relational Approach rejects the view of the state as a neutral or monolithic actor, instead conceptualising it as a strategically selective field. It emphasises the interplay between structural contexts (constraints, institutional legacies, and systemic pressures) and strategic agency (actors' choices and maneuvers).
2. CCPS Volume 11, Issue 2 (2025) looks into the interplay of the foundations of perceptual geoeconomics—trade realignment, media framing, and public perception, to understand the transformation of global power relations.

References

- Flores, R.B. (2025). Strategies under Constraint: China's Rise, Regional Responses, and the Strategic-Relational Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 1-5.
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