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China's deepening digital presence in the global South

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ABSTRACT
The steady expansion of China's digital footprints across the developing world – including many Commonwealth countries – has triggered concerns that an authoritarian alternative digital infrastructure is being created to challenge the US hegemony in this arena. The article maps the growing Chinese presence across the global South, particularly in relation to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. The security and data protection issues are addressed, as is the apprehension that at a time when Western governments are curtailing their aid budgets, China is likely to further strengthen its already considerable influence, offering a contrasting state-led model for a digitally connected world.

KEYWORDS
China; Belt and Road Initiative; BRICS; digital silk road

For more than a quarter of a century, China has been steadily increasing its global presence and influence across the world, including in Commonwealth countries at a time when a post-Brexit Britain navigates a new global reality. China is already the world's second-biggest economy in GDP terms and the largest trading nation. In 2023, for the fifth consecutive year, China (including Hong Kong), had the most companies in the *Fortune Global 500* list – 142 followed by the United States at 136, although this lead was reversed in 2024 for the first time since 2018 with US having 139 companies, to China's 133 (Fortune, 2024). China's presence is especially strong in the global South which, by 2027, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), will account for 29% of global GDP, overtaking the G7, with China contributing more than 20% (IMF, 2023). Within the global South, China's focus has been on Africa where, in the past two decades, Chinese business and government investment has soared: more than one million Chinese speakers now live in Africa.

Apart from being a permanent and influential member of the United Nations Security Council, China remains the founding member of such non-Western groupings as BRICS (originally comprising Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which aim to offer alternative geopolitical and financial perspectives to counter Western hegemony embedded in the international financial system through institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. In operation as a formal group since 2006 and holding annual summits since 2009, the BRICS group

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created, in 2014, the BRICS's New Development Bank (NDB) as a China-led mechanism to create a 'New Bretton Woods' as an alternative and sustainable post-Covid world economic order (Gallagher & Kozul-Wright, 2021). Despite predictions to the contrary among dominant Western scholarship and elite media, the BRICS grouping of nations is expanding and increasing in influence (see contributions in Thussu & Nordenstreng, 2021) and includes significant Commonwealth countries. The share of BRICS in global GDP grew from 18% in 2010 to 26% in 2021, with China accounting for more than 70% of BRICS GDP in 2021 (UNCTAD, 2023, p. 5).

During the 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg, four new countries were admitted: Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and Ethiopia, while Indonesia joined in 2024. Many others, including Nigeria and Türkiye, also want to be part of this group. Joining the BRICS might allow members to trade in their own currencies and reduce, if not end, their dollar dependence. BRICS' first expansion in 13 years, engineered mainly by China, was described by a Reuters report as 'push to reshuffle a world order it sees as outdated' (Reuters, 2023). The expanded BRICS group will contain some of the world's largest oil exporters, namely Russia and Iran, as well as some of its biggest importers, China and India (Daoud & Johnson, 2023). In 2022, BRICS accounted for 36% of the global economy, against 30% for the G-7, forecasting that by 2040, the share of BRICS+ will be 45% compared with 21% for the G-7.

Beyond BRICS, China's global ambitions are best represented by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Critics in the West have argued that BRI is a geopolitical rather than economic project, in which political elites from the global South have been coopted by Beijing with the aim of creating a new China-led global order in the form of a non-territorial 'empire' (Tudoroiu, 2024). By 2023, as many as 152 countries as well as 32 international organisations were involved in the BRI, generating trade and investment in the past decade in the range of more than US$2 trillion. Marking its tenth anniversary, the Chinese government defined BRI as 'the long-term, transnational and systematic global project of the 21st century'. 'It has succeeded in taking its first step on a long journey . . . [it] will demonstrate greater creativity and vitality, become more open and inclusive, and generate new opportunities for both China and the rest of the world' (Government of China, 2023). From Beijing's perspective, BRI is promoting a world view based on harmony and cooperation and providing an alternative infrastructure for the global South: China is now the largest aid giver to the developing world (Dreher et al., 2022). From a Western viewpoint, the BRI appears to be a concerted effort to increase Beijing's influence in these countries (Tudoroiu & Kuteleva, 2022), challenging the existing rules of the Western devised and managed liberal international system (Murphy, 2022).

Apart from constructing heavy infrastructure – roads, ports and airports – the BRI is increasingly focusing on 'digital silk roads', creating the hardware for global digital communications, which could be a potential advantage in internationalising China's increasingly sophisticated tech sector (Freymann, 2020), again seen as a challenge to the dominance of Western corporations. In this expansion, China's digital corporations, such as Tencent and Alibaba have played a crucial role. Researchers from a Berlin-based think tank, the Mercator Institute for China Studies, argue that this digital outreach is 'fundamentally linked to competition between systems, and China's differences with the principles of the liberal market economy, free trade, and liberal democracy' (Shi-Kupfer & Ohlberg, 2019, p. 46). The growing importance of digital connectivity in international relations has also been articulated in relation to peace-building (Richmond et al., 2023) as well as warfare where it is already having 'a profound impact upon the physical realm of international relations and the informational representations of it' (Chifu & Simons, 2023, p. 5).

Building a global infrastructure

The infrastructure push has made the Chinese imprint very visible across the globe, including in Commonwealth countries. As a major power which aspires to global geo-economic influence over international sea-lanes and commercial ports underpinning the global flow of goods, China has considerably expanded its maritime presence, especially since the launch of BRI. Apart from Antarctica, China operates or has ownership in at least one port in every continent (see Table 1). According to data analysed by the Council on Foreign Relations by mid-2024, there were 129 port projects in which Chinese companies had 'acquired varied equity ownership or operational stakes' (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

China has also invested heavily in developing overseas airport projects, according to data compiled under the Tracking China's Investment in Overseas Airports project of the Council on Foreign Relations, Chinese presence in the global aviation world is also growing steadily (see Table 2).

Table 1. Chinese ports of call in selected Commonwealth countries.

Country	Total investment (US$billion)	No of port projects
Australia	8.1	3
Sri Lanka	3.9	4
Singapore	2.6	1
Nigeria	1.7	2
Cameroon	1.4	2
Kenya	0.95	3

Data source: Council on Foreign Relations, August 2024

Table 2. China-funded airports in selected Commonwealth countries.

Country	Investment (US$million)
Dominica (Dominica International Airport)	1,000
Pakistan (New Gwadar International Airport)	246
Uganda (Entebbe International Airport)	200
Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar Airport)	184
Zimbabwe (Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport)	153
Guyana (Cheddi Jagan International Airport)	150
Antigua and Barbuda (V.C. Bird International Airport)	100
Grenada (Maurice Bishop International Airport)	67
Kenya (Kisumu International Airport)	61

Data source: Council on Foreign Relations (2023)

Creation of transportation networks is crucial for the export of natural resources and China is using its BRI infrastructure to develop these, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), giving access to Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. The CPEC has now been extended to Afghanistan, where China is also the largest investor in mineral resources, having acquired mining contracts, including drilling rights in the

Amu Darya Basin and exploration rights in the Aynak copper mine (Johny & Krishnan, 2022). As a flagship project of BRI, CPEC has been projected as a great success story.

Perhaps the most important impact of China's presence is to be seen in Africa, where China is investing in infrastructure as part of the BRI. This includes such projects as a new railway linking Nairobi to the coastal port at Mombasa in Kenya, and copper mines and construction sites in Zambia. China is also transforming the continent's information space by providing information and communication hardware to expand access to the internet and mobile phones; training African broadcasters via exchange programmes; and setting up an Africa-specific channel of CGTN (China Global Television Network) as well as China's international news agency Xinhua offering its content free of charge to media organisations, to promote 'ideological biases' (Grassi, 2014; Umejei, 2020).

Concern about Chinese aid to the continent is creating tensions with the West (Blair et al., 2022) but, unlike the West, Beijing is not linking aid to promoting liberal democracy and human rights, thus making it less intrusive in governance, a situation favoured by African elites. China's media strategies in Africa may also entail policing the information space for security and citizenship (Gagliardone, 2019; Zhang et al., 2016). Another sign of Chinese cultural presence is the expansion of Confucius Institutes in the continent as well as training institutes: in 2022, a US$40 million facility in Tanzania funded by China was opened to train cadres from the governing parties belonging to various African nations (Nyabiage, 2022).

Chinese hardware for global communication

China is increasingly challenging the US-dominated global communication infrastructure, as in the past two decades it has expanded phenomenally in almost all domains of communication – land, maritime and space. China is the world's second largest satellite owner after the United States. According to China's 2016 document '*State Plan for Informationization in the Period of the 13th Five Year Plan*', the country will develop a space-based infrastructure to provide seamless internet and other information services anywhere on the earth's surface, using a dispersed array of floating platforms high in the atmosphere, communications satellites, and networked space capabilities in higher orbits. The plan calls for China to integrate remote-sensing and telemetry systems associated with the BeiDou Global Navigation Satellite System, other satellites, near-space flight vehicles and crewed aircraft, while 'coordinating the construction of ground-based infrastructure and the development of military-civil fusion, in order to obtain global service capabilities as fast as possible' (cited in Defense Intelligence Agency, 2022, p. iv).

China is ahead of almost every other nation in terms of infrastructure for 5G and 6G technology, the dissemination of which is giving Beijing unprecedented reach in countries using its more affordable mobile services, such as for the Internet of Things (IoT) (DeNardis, 2020). Privately owned Huawei, the world's largest telecoms equipment supplier, is pushing for global 5G projects in 170 countries, mostly in the global South. However, due to increasing security concerns, Western governments, as well as many others, including that of India, have demanded that Huawei technology be removed from state-sensitive communication systems as it could allow the Chinese government to collect and centralise massive quantities of data, and potentially attack communications networks and public utilities. Huawei has repeatedly asserted that its equipment has never been used and will never be used, to spy. However, US intelligence agencies lobbied members of the 'Five Eyes' (the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) to ban Huawei from their 5G infrastructure on national security grounds and with success: New Zealand and Australia banned it in 2018, followed by Canada in 2022, while Britain decided to phase out the Chinese company by 2027.

In 2020, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the world's largest chip supplier and which had supplied more than 90% of Huawei's smartphone chips, ceased business with Huawei, citing US export controls. In 2021, President Joe Biden's administration signed a bill aimed at preventing Huawei and ZTE from receiving equipment-making licences from US regulators, and in 2023, stopped providing licences for US companies to export goods to Huawei and also signed legislation that precludes any Chinese manufacturer from obtaining chips or chipmaking equipment made with US parts anywhere in the world.

It has been argued that Huawei has been penalised to serve as a warning in the new 'technology cold war' against China, as such companies are 'reshaping the distribution of profits along the global value chain' which has traditionally and primarily 'controlled by Western multinationals' (Wen, 2020). The increasing influence that Chinese ICT firms have gained in global markets has also 'endowed them with growing bargaining power vis-à-vis transnational capital and Western governments' (Wen, 2020, p.187).

Reimagining the 'Silk Road' in its digital form

In 2015, China extended the BRI into the virtual world by announcing a Digital Silk Road (DSR), which will provide important pathways for expanding China's global influence in the digital realm. Huawei and ZTE are spearheading projects focused on basic ICT infrastructure, building fibre-optic cables and smart-cities that are the foundation for enhanced digital connectivity. State-owned telecommunication companies, such as China Mobile, China Telecom and CITIC Telecom, are primarily responsible for DSR projects related to carrier services, which allow for improved telecom coverage and broadband availability. China has subsidised its 5G companies as many BRI countries are using Huawei's equipment to build 5G networks, attracted by the company's ability to provide high-quality networks for low prices. Huawei is helping Malaysia build its 5G network and is investing heavily in the emerging 6G technology as well as cloud services so that other companies are dependent on its patents, rather than relying on imports from the US (Hille et al., 2021, p. 5). In addition, such private-owned Chinese companies including Alibaba, Tencent and JD have been involved in the development of over-the-counter services, leveraging their respective specialities to build data and cloud centres and promote e-commerce models in recipient countries.

The DSR could enable China to become the world's leading supplier of the physical infrastructure for next-generation digital networks (Gordon et al., 2020, p. 20). The DSR encompasses undersea cables, data centres, 5G systems and a 'space information corridor' to supplant GPS as the world's most advanced satellite navigation technology. More than 100 countries have agreed to participate as part of BRI, including many Commonwealth countries, but not all have accepted Chinese investment into their critical infrastructure. It represents an emerging architecture for a Chinese-led bloc of countries where Western powers have limited access and influence (Freymann, 2020). China is already a 'leading provider [of] information and telecommunications networks', as well as their supporting hardware, software and the standards, which, according to one commentator, gives it the 'potential to cement its global dominance' (Markey, 2020, pp. 3–4).

Already, by 2019 China's BeiDou was equipped with more active satellites than those that support the Global Positioning System (GPS). Such a 'competitive positioning service system heralds the end of the GPS's monopoly as the dominant provider of real-time location information around the world', as well as concerns that under the DSR umbrella, Beijing might create a 'cascade of China-driven 5G standards' for adoption by BRI countries (Gordon et al., 2020, p. 22).

In the maritime domain, Chinese telecommunications firms such as China Mobile, China Telecom and China Unicom have invested heavily in undersea cables across the world, especially focusing on the global South. Hengtong Group and its subsidiaries, Huawei Marine, and Hengtong Marine, led the construction of the PEACE (Pakistan East Africa Cable Express) cable, a DSR project that starts in Gwadar and Karachi in Pakistan, connecting South Asia with East Africa, aiming to land in Marseille in France. Another key example is Huawei's construction of the South Atlantic Inter Link (SAIL), linking Kribi, Cameroon, with Fortaleza, Brazil (ECFR, 2021).

As China expands its digital footprint via BRI and Digital Silk Road telecom infrastructure projects, such data extraction is likely to deepen and expand. In many Western countries, this generates fear that the increasing adoption of Chinese data-driven technologies and services in BRI countries and interconnectivity across China and BRI countries might support new global surveillance regimes dependent on Chinese technologies (Pei, 2024). China has become, according to a recent study, 'a global data extractor' drawing on 'the exploitative data-gathering practices that built Silicon Valley' (Kokas, 2022, p. 2). This concern in the West has to be seen in the context of the fact that US-based, global digital corporations have been doing this surreptitiously and successfully over the last two decades (see, for example, Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

Beyond creating a global alternative digital infrastructure, China has also emerged as a key voice in international internet governance debates including those about digital data. It has launched the 'Global Data Security Initiative to provide a blueprint for developing global data security rules'. A 2023 White Paper titled 'China's Law-Based Cyberspace Governance in the New Era' states: 'Based on its own realities, and learning from other countries' experience, China has created a cyberspace governance model with distinct Chinese characteristics' (quoted in China Daily, 2023).

This version of cyberspace and its commercialism is supported by the growing globalisation of China's powerful private digital corporations – notably Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Sina (referred to by the BATS acronym). In the past two decades, China has developed its own internet and social media platforms, with versions of Google (Baidu), Facebook (Renren), Amazon (Alibaba), Twitter (Weibo), WhatsApp (WeChat) and other US-based digital properties (Chen, 2023; Wong, 2022). Many of these companies are now going global. Alibaba Cloud, ranked fifth in the world in an arena dominated by Microsoft and Amazon, for example, has many data centres outside China, including in the US, Japan, Australia, Germany, and Dubai. *Chuhai* (going overseas) is part of the global expansion among Chinese corporations, 'a business decision, driven by platform capitalism' and 'underpinned by a political imperative, particularly in the context of what appears to be a cosy state-business relationship' (Keane et al., 2021, p. 75).

In 2012, Tencent launched an English version of its Weixin messenger application, as WeChat, to promote the brand internationally. A decade later, the app is being used by a billion people globally and is also accessible in translated versions in Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Turkish, Japanese, Korean and Polish. Unlike its US counterparts, such as WhatsApp, WeChat allows its users not only to make calls and send messages but also to pay bills and for shopping (including in many overseas stores), order goods and services, and transfer money. In mobile telephony, too, Chinese presence is growing, particularly in the global South, with such Chinese smartphone brands as Vivo, Lenovo, Xiaomi and Oppo becoming ubiquitous across the developing world, having access to enormous amount of data.

Dealing with such large-scale data raises questions about privacy and commodification of information, since organisations such as Alibaba and Tencent have extraordinary access. Alipay introduced a facial recognition payment service in 2017. As a typical example of what has been described as 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), ByteDance-owned TikTok relies on AI for user profiling and targeted advertising and has the power to mould public opinion and promote particular narratives, especially aimed at a younger demographic. Many of these companies are investing heavily in AI, triggering concerns about an AI arms race with the US (Ma, 2021).

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, one of the world's most advanced regimes of 'information management' - the so-called 'Great Firewall' - has become more pervasive and increasingly relying on covert methods (Roberts, 2018; Yang, 2016). As Chinese tech further globalises, the consequences of the presence and influence of Chinese digital and technology companies are being viewed by some commentators as 'Trojan horses that enable and export China's digital authoritarianism and surveillance capitalism' (Cave et al., 2019). The project 'Mapping China's Technology Giants' undertaken by an Australian think tank analysed the Chinese Communist Party's 'global data ecosystem', looking at the interactions between political agenda-setting, active shaping of international technical standards, technical capabilities, and data as a strategic resource. It reported: 'For the Chinese party-state, data and the information derived from it contribute to everything . . . . Globally, it ranges from expanding the PRC's role in the global economy to understanding how to shape and control its global operating environment' (Hoffman & Attrill, 2021, p. 6).

China's media 'charm offensive'

In parallel with its economic and military prowess, under President Xi Jinping China has heavily invested in promoting its soft power, to influence global public opinion, as well as to mitigate international criticism of the one-party state. This 'discourse power' is being deployed to promote a Chinese version of globalisation. Building a global 'community with a shared future', as an alternative worldview to the dominant US-defined 'unilateral' approach, is a central theme in this discourse – which also emphasises such principles as 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of other nations and protecting and preserving 'state sovereignty' (Thibaut, 2022).

A 2020 article in *Party & Government Forum*, a journal run by the Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, noted: 'Before the internet era, European and American countries had played a leading role in forming the new world economic order, political order, and legal order' but 'in the era of the internet, especially in the new era of informatization pioneered by 5G, it is entirely possible for China to go ahead and make greater contributions'. 'In the internet era, whoever has the discourse power and rule-making power has the power to lead the future order', it said. From this perspective, 5G offers a 'historic opportunity' for leadership in more than just technology and a chance to 'enhance China's international competitiveness' – despite having missed out on past, similar revolutionary shifts' (quoted in Doshi, De La Bruyère, et al., 2021, pp. 6–7).

To communicate such a worldview to a generally unreceptive global audience, China has embarked on an ambitious strategy. Communication formed part of the concept of 'comprehensive national power' (*zonghe guoli*) under President Deng Xiaoping but, in the past two decades, soft power has become a fashionable term in China. In the initial years, the focus was on creating and then expanding Confucius Institutes, as part of the public diplomacy infrastructure and were envisaged as promoting a Chinese version of globalisation (Hartig, 2015). However, as Confucius Institutes were seen, especially in the West, as legitimising Chinese cultural presence and infiltrating universities (Sahlins, 2015), the communicating part has become more challenging as their coverage in the Western media has been generally negative (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2019).

The other major component of this 'charm offensive' is evident in how Beijing has actively internationalised its media channels to rival the US-dominated global media sphere (Cook, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2023). The most powerful voice of Chinese state media, CGTN, has expanded in recent years to cover the globe, broadcasting in English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic, with a special focus on Africa (Marsh, 2023). The continent receives particular attention not only in terms of news and current affairs via CGTN but entertainment programmes on such networks as StarTimes, with operations in 30 African countries (Lewis, 2024). Disseminating the message of China as a 'responsible power' is supported by other generously state-funded 'central media', notably Xinhua news agency, China Radio International (broadcasting in 61 languages via its six overseas regional hubs and with affiliations with 70 overseas radio stations) the English-language publications *China Daily* and the more popular *Global Times* (Thussu, 2019).

In contrast with many other nations that are cutting costs on public diplomacy, China has 'devoted significant resources to communicating its values and culture amid the intensification of its global footprint' (Zhang & Schultz, 2022, p. 2). The country has invested billions of dollars in the past two decades to communicate its version of globalisation to a largely unresponsive global audience (Fifield, 2020). To communicate BRI to such an audience, in 2017, the Chinese authorities created the Belt and Road News Network, comprising 208 media organisations from 98 countries and whose board is chaired by the Communist Party mouthpiece the *People's Daily*, to tell the stories about the BRI in a way that 'shapes healthy public opinion and helps the BRI yield more substantial results for people living in countries along the Belt and Road' (Belt and Road News Network, 2019; Fifield, 2020).

In addition to these legacy media, China has been actively using digital communication, including 'clickbaits' to compete for visibility in the global media sphere as well as to counter anti-China content in international media (Lu & Pan, 2021). An Australian think tank report claimed that 'foreign social media influencers are creating content about Xinjiang that's being used as part of a wider, global propaganda push by the Chinese state to counter critical reporting about human rights abuses in the region' (Ryan et al., 2021, p. 4).

The government has used social media influencers to promote its agenda by generating lucrative traffic for the influencers by sharing videos with millions of followers on YouTube, Twitter (now X) and Facebook, platforms which the government blocks inside China to prevent the uncontrolled spread of information, 'as propaganda megaphones for the wider world' (Mozur et al., 2021). A 2020 report by the US-based Freedom House titled *Beijing's Global Megaphone* noted: 'Chinese officials are making a more explicit effort to present China as a model for other countries, and they are taking concrete steps to encourage emulation through trainings for foreign personnel and technology transfers to foreign state-owned media outlets' (Cook, 2020, p. 2).

While this approach of legitimising China's expansion has international ambitions, the focus remains on the global South, considered more amenable to Communist Party-approved narratives, given these countries' dependence on Chinese largesse. China is also using international platforms to spread its ideology, leveraging Beijing's influence to gain government support for its initiatives in multilateral settings like the UN, as well as Beijing-sponsored regional forums such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Thussu, 2025).

Despite such multifaceted and multipronged attempts at legitimising Chinese narratives on global affairs, China's international media networks lack credibility mainly because of the 'multilayered political control that results in pre-censored content' (Repnikova, 2022, p. 26). Since the Central Propaganda Department sets the 'ideological direction', selecting and monitoring content, it is viewed outside China as little more than party propaganda and therefore remains largely ineffective. As one commentator has noted, 'So long as its political system denies, rather than enables, free human development, its propaganda efforts will face an uphill battle' (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 107).

Western concerns about Chinese digital dominance

China's unprecedented expansion and penetration of the global digital domain has generated much anxiety, especially in the US and its democratic allies about a one-party state influencing the global agenda in the internet age. Commentators accuse China of 'exporting digital systems that make authoritarianism more effective than ever' (Beckley, 2022). Others have argued that beyond technological domination in the global South, as a 'sentinel state' China poses serious security threats to the world at large and emphasised the need for 'decoupling' with China (Pei, 2024). However, given the economic and technological prowess of China, the US and its European allies now speak of 'friend-shoring' to reduce China's role in strategically important supply chains, while still recognising the reliance on China's lucrative market and thus settling for 'de-risking' rather than 'decoupling' from China (Cave, 2023). Some have advocated 'weaponization' of US 'digital trade relationships to create a system that promotes its preference for internet governance', forcing countries to choose between maintaining access to their markets in what has been described as 'democratic digital supply chain', or embracing China's authoritarian model (Knake, 2020, p. 1 and 2).

Some Commonwealth countries have other security-related fears. Canada is concerned about the 'polar silk road': in 2021, China announced its intention to construct a 'polar silk road' – to extend its BRI project and participate in the development of Arctic shipping routes (Doshi, Dale-Huang, et al., 2021). Despite being a non-Arctic state, China became an observer member of the Arctic Council in 2013, and its presence is increasing in the resource-rich region with huge potential for exploration as 'longer periods of an ice-free Arctic make the Arctic attractive' (Nilsson & Christensen, 2019, p. 5).

Beyond the West, other countries notably India, also share security apprehensions vis-à-vis China with which it has a long-standing border dispute – which led to a fatal confrontation between the two armies in 2020, and brought the relationship to its lowest point in recent decades. New Delhi opposes the BRI and views it as a project to realise the 'geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic ambitions' of China (Lele & Roy, 2019, p. 56). Particularly problematic is the fact that parts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) cross the disputed border between the two Asian giants. For its part, China sees India as a potential threat to its claim to be the leader of the global South. India's presidency of the G-20 in 2023 was an opportunity that the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi used to the fullest to re-establish its credentials as an articulate voice of the global South, with India's long tradition of pursuing a 'non-aligned' foreign policy. A virtual summit, the 'Voice of the Global South', was held in New Delhi in January 2023, attended by representatives from 125 countries. Providing further impetus to these key processes of amplifying the voice of the global South, India ensured that the African Union was given full membership of the G-20 at the summit in September 2023 in New Delhi.

Many of China's eastern neighbours, especially the countries around the South China Sea, are also concerned about its geopolitical ambitions. Such US-led security partnerships as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which includes Australia, India, and Japan, as well as the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US), have emerged as anti-China groupings in the Indo-Pacific region.

Amid all this geopolitical tension, China continues to invest in promoting its overseas policies through its state media. Such targeted messaging, notes an Atlantic Council report, helps China to legitimise its 'discourse power', which it sees 'as essential for reshaping the international environment in a way that better facilitates the expression of Chinese power' and, in the long run, 'makes the soil fertile globally for their message to seed' (Thibaut, 2022, p. 3). Despite these setbacks, Chinese diplomats have been using X (formerly Twitter) – as part of the strategy of 'talking back' – in what has been termed as 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy (Dai & Luqiu, 2024; Martin, 2021). These propagandists have also used clickbait to enhance the visibility of Chinese narratives, often deploying platforms such as Facebook and X, which, ironically, are banned in the country (Lu & Pan, 2021). Some have cautioned about the globalisation of a 'surveillance state' using its technological prowess to control information and to shape as well as monitor discourse (Chin & Lin, 2022).

The US sees the digital silk road as a force multiplier for Beijing's espionage capabilities and that it enables the Chinese government to seize an enormous amount of personal data, business information, and both government and military intelligence and exploit this for geopolitical ends. In June 2021, President Biden signed an

Executive Order to prohibit US investment in China's 'military-industrial complex' – the use of Chinese surveillance technology outside China, as well as the development or use of Chinese surveillance technology, to facilitate repression or serious human rights abuses constitute unusual and extraordinary threats. Britain's 2021 'Integrated Military Review' echoes similar concerns: 'Long established techniques of influence and leverage, such as economic coercion, propaganda, intellectual property theft and espionage, have been supercharged by ubiquitous information and technological transformation ... As we become increasingly challenged below the threshold of open warfare, the battle of the narratives and use of non-lethal means to influence and secure objectives will characterise the future operating environment' (Ministry of Defence, 2021, p. 5).

China, Trump 2.0 and the global South

The election in November 2024 of Donald Trump as the President of the United States for a second term has raised concerns in China about the escalation of trade-related disputes between the world's two biggest economies. Although the Chinese economy has been growing at much slower rate than before, it remains one of the most important global actors geopolitically as well as geoeconomically. As tensions rise with the West, such Chinese initiatives as the BRI are likely to expand and deepen their engagement with the global South. An EU-supported study reported that, 'most regions in the world hold a rather positive view' of BRI, and 'Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa display [the] most positive' (García-Herrero & Schindowski, 2023, p. 16). Chinese foreign policy elites and the official media now speak about the 'Belt and Road Cooperation' instead of 'Belt and Road Initiative'. The 'Global Development Initiative' is particularly relevant at a time when Western governments are cutting back on foreign aid while Trump 2.0 administration has announced a freeze on foreign aid and dismantled USAID, the premier global organisation for development aid.

This gives China an unprecedented opportunity to further strengthen its presence in the global South. China's aid projects reflect the changing geopolitics of aid, investment and South–South cooperation also demonstrating the limitations of the Western developmental model, according to which industrial nations would be the shining example for poorer countries; as one commentator noted, 'Globalization has almost dissolved the established North-South scheme' (Kothari et al., 2019, p. xiii and xiv). Globalized economies such as China have begun to assert themselves as humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, producing 'new or emancipatory modalities' of 'development', especially in the context of Africa (Power, 2019).

The biggest challenge to Western hegemony in the developmental field has emerged from China's success in exporting its developmental model to other parts of the world, including many Commonwealth countries and how this cooperation is transforming a large section of the global South. Developmental geopolitics has emerged as an intellectual project in China, especially since the launch of the BRI (Cheng & Liu, 2021). As the biggest aid provider, China has been instrumental in unleashing the structural transformation underway in many parts of the global South, partly because of growing South–South development aid and cooperation, although this is not without its drawbacks. A 2021 study of international development finance from China, which examined more than 13,000 projects worth US$843 billion across 165 countries over an

18-year period, found that with annual international development finance commitments of US$85 billion a year, China outspends the US and other major powers on a 2-to-1 basis or more. It noted instances of debt trap and found that 35% of the BRI infrastructure projects have encountered major implementation problems (Malik et al., 2021). Although China's public diplomacy is geared to presenting itself as 'a muscular and commercially savvy lender to the developing world', the terms and conditions of its lending remain obscure, and the contracts contain confidentiality clauses that obscure borrowers from revealing the terms or, in some cases, even the existence of the debt (Gelpern et al., 2021).

Communication hardware and software are an integral part of Chinese aid packages, symbolising the country's 'globalising internet' with a state-centric governance model with implications for debates around the internet governance (see essays in Hong & Harwit, 2022). Chinese internet connectivity could remove the existing digital divides in the global South: according to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2023, some 2.6 billion people worldwide were still not online, and it found that although 84% of people in high-income countries are covered by 5G networks the figure for the world's poorest countries is barely 4% (ITU, 2024).

Despite consistent criticism of China's developmental diplomacy in the Western media, the country has demonstrated that it has tackled one of the most pressing problems of development by raising over 850 million of its own people out of poverty over the past 40 years, according to the World Bank. In November 2020, China officially declared that it had eradicated extreme poverty. A 2021 White Paper of the Chinese government celebrated the ending of poverty thus:

> China is home to nearly one fifth of the world's population. Its complete eradication of extreme poverty – the first target of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – 10 years ahead of schedule is a milestone in the history of the Chinese nation and the history of humankind, making an important contribution to the cause of global poverty alleviation. (Government of China, 2021, pp. 1–2)

In much of the global South as well as within multilateral organisations, Chinese achievements in this regard are acknowledged, despite the ecological costs of such rapid and transformational changes in terms of environmental degradation (Huang, 2020). With more than one trillion dollars of investment, the BRI is viewed as a 'global alternative infrastructure', forcing the US and its allies to revise their approach to investing in the global South. The first reaction came from Japan, which launched in 2015 its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure: Investment for Asia's Future' (PQI), with an investment of US$110 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015). The West reacted later: in 2019, the first Trump administration announced the creation of a new agency, the US international Development Finance Corporation (DFC), with access to US$60 billion in financial capital to help US businesses invest in emerging markets, with lending intended for private investors, not governments. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation, which became part of the DFC, launched its 'Connect Africa' initiative, which will invest more than US$1 billion in projects in Africa that support transportation, communications and 'value chains'. In 2021, the United States launched the 'Build Back Better' project, aimed to reduce the US$40 trillion infrastructure gap in low- and middle-income countries (White House, 2021).

Britain announced its Clean Green Initiative – US$3.4 billion over five years (2021-–2026) (UK Government, 2021), while in December of the same year the EU set out a US $298 billion Global Gateway strategy to support infrastructure projects across the world with a view to enhance connectivity (European Commission, 2021). In 2022, the G7's new Global Investment and Infrastructure Partnership Plan aimed to raise US$600 billion from private and public funds by 2027, with US$200 billion coming from the United States (White House, 2022). These Western initiatives are also influenced by geopolitical considerations rather than having clear developmental goals but officially claim to promote democratic values, operate high standards and conform to the principles of good governance and transparency. With the priorities of the Trump administration on MAGA, it is unlikely that these developmental initiatives will make much of a dent in the global South where China is likely to further consolidate its already considerable influence. As a leading China observer notes: 'The major obstacle to China's rise on the international stage is not US hostility or internal foes. Rather, it is the authoritarian strand of the Chinese Communist Party's core identity', adding that 'Chinese authoritarianism threatens to limit Beijing's ability to create a plausible new form of global order' (Mitter, 2021, p. 174).

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