

China's Geopolitical Ambitions and Global Order

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Abstract: China's growing economic, military, diplomatic, and technological capabilities have intensified debate over whether its rise is reforming, supplementing, or challenging the existing global order. The problem addressed in this study is that China's expanding geopolitical activity is often treated as evidence of increased influence, even though activity and capability do not necessarily change international outcomes. Moreover, research frequently examines individual channels of Chinese influence separately, limiting understanding of how they interact and whether their effects are reinforced or offset. This study examines China's geopolitical ambitions and their implications for the distribution of global influence across seven dimensions: diplomacy, economic statecraft, military capability, institutional engagement, technology, normative action, and territorial assertiveness. The study is guided by the objective of assessing how each dimension may affect global influence. It adopts neoclassical realism as its theoretical framework, emphasizing that material capabilities create opportunities and constraints but are filtered through leadership perceptions, domestic priorities, state capacity, and the responses of other actors. Methodologically, the study uses qualitative content analysis of relevant primary and secondary documentary sources, including official statements, international institutional records, academic research, and reports from recognized organizations. The analysis distinguishes stated objectives, policy instruments, and observable outcomes, while considering counterevidence and alternative explanations. The findings indicate that China has expanded its capacity to shape international choices, but its influence is uneven, issue-specific, and contested. Diplomacy creates opportunities for agenda-setting and coalition-building, while economic relationships can provide leverage where partners are vulnerable and alternatives are limited. Military modernization can strengthen deterrence and bargaining power but may also stimulate balancing and distrust. Institutional initiatives broaden available forums, although participation and membership do not establish control or systemic transformation. Technological reach can shape infrastructure and standards, but security concerns and diversification constrain its effects. Normative advocacy may influence international language, yet acceptance and implementation require evidence beyond rhetoric. Territorial assertiveness can alter bargaining conditions while also generating legal, diplomatic, and security costs. The study concludes that China is seeking to reshape aspects of global governance while operating within many existing arrangements; it has neither uniformly displaced the established order nor achieved comprehensive control over it. The study contributes an integrated framework for evaluating China's influence and offers implications for policy, research, and international cooperation.

Keywords: China, Geopolitical Ambitions, Global Order, Global Influence, Neoclassical Realism, Economic Statecraft, Military Modernization, International Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

China's geopolitical ambitions and the evolution of global order are closely connected, but they should not be treated as identical phenomena. Geopolitical ambition refers to a state's pursuit of security, status, influence, and capacity to shape the rules and institutions governing international affairs. Global order, in turn, encompasses the distribution of power among states, the institutions through which they coordinate, and the rules and norms that confer legitimacy on international conduct. China's rise has made this relationship particularly consequential: the country has become a central actor in world trade, a major military power, an increasingly influential diplomatic participant, and a source of technological and institutional initiatives. Yet the extent to which these developments have redistributed global influence remains contested. Some accounts emphasize China's integration into existing institutions, others stress its efforts to reform or supplement them, while still others interpret its actions as a challenge to the prevailing order[1][2][3]. The background to this study therefore lies in a central empirical question: through which channels, and to what degree, do China's geopolitical ambitions affect the distribution of global influence? Historically, China's current position followed a long period of weakness and foreign intervention, the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, and the economic reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping from 1978. Those reforms opened the economy to trade and investment while retaining the Communist Party's political monopoly, creating a distinctive combination of market integration and centralized political authority. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 accelerated its integration into the global economy and helped transform its international role. In 2000, China accounted for about 3.6 percent of world gross domestic product measured at current prices, by 2023, its share was approximately 17 percent, while its share of global merchandise exports had risen to around 14 percent[4][5]. This expansion did not simply increase national wealth: it created trade relationships, investment capacity, and supply-chain connections that could be converted into diplomatic leverage and international influence. At the same time, China continued to benefit from major features of the existing economic order, including access to global markets and participation in institutions such as the WTO. The historical trajectory thus presents a duality: China's rise has taken place within an order it did not design, while its growing capabilities have enabled it to seek a greater role in shaping that order.

The scale of this transformation is visible in contemporary economic indicators, although such measures do not by themselves establish political influence. China's GDP was approximately US\$17.8 trillion in 2023 at current prices, making it the world's second-largest national economy on that measure, in purchasing-power-parity terms, it was larger than the United States[6]. China is also a major trading partner for a broad range of economies and remains deeply embedded in manufacturing and global supply chains. The Belt and Road Initiative, announced in 2013, extended this economic presence through transport, energy, and digital infrastructure projects, though estimates of its total financing differ according to what counts as a BRI project and whether commitments or disbursements are measured[7][8]. These figures matter to the global order because economic scale can influence bargaining power, access to markets, and the ability to offer finance or infrastructure. However, they also reveal a measurement problem: trade volume, lending, or project participation cannot automatically be equated with political alignment or durable influence. Recipient governments make their own choices, projects can encounter debt, implementation, and environmental challenges, and commercial relationships can produce mutual dependence rather than one-sided control. Assessing the economic effect on global influence therefore requires examining outcomes such as changes in policy, institutional participation, or

diplomatic behaviour rather than treating economic activity as influence in itself. Alongside economic expansion, China has pursued a more active diplomatic presence and greater participation in international governance. It is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, participates in the G20 and other multilateral forums, and has expanded bilateral partnerships and high-level diplomatic engagement. Its diplomacy has included efforts to present China as a defender of development, sovereignty, and multilateral cooperation, while also seeking support for positions on issues it identifies as core interests. Diplomatic influence can be observed in agenda-setting, coalition formation, mediation, institutional leadership, and the ability to secure support for preferred language or resolutions, it should not be inferred merely from the number of meetings or partnerships. China's diplomatic activity is particularly relevant because global influence is partly relational: a state gains influence when other governments respond to its initiatives, support its positions, or adjust their policies in anticipation of its preferences. Yet the results are uneven. China's diplomatic reach has grown, but distrust over security disputes, political differences, and concerns about economic dependence can limit its ability to convert engagement into broad legitimacy. The study consequently focuses on the effect of diplomatic action on the distribution of global influence, while distinguishing diplomatic presence from demonstrated diplomatic outcomes[9].

Economic and diplomatic activity is complemented by military modernization, which affects both China's regional position and perceptions of the wider balance of power. China's defense budget has increased substantially over several decades. SIPRI estimated Chinese military expenditure at about US\$296 billion in 2023, the second-largest national total after the United States, though comparisons are affected by differences in accounting, purchasing power, and the scope of reported expenditure[10]. China has invested in naval forces, missiles, air power, space and cyber capabilities, and nuclear modernization. These developments have strengthened its capacity to deter intervention and to operate more effectively in its surrounding regions. They also influence the calculations of neighbouring states and the United States, contributing to defense cooperation, military planning, and regional balancing. Military capability can thus redistribute influence by changing the costs and risks of opposing a state's preferences. Nevertheless, capability is not equivalent to control: it may deter some actions while provoking counterbalancing, reducing trust, or increasing the risk of crisis. The military dimension of this study therefore concerns not only China's growing capabilities but also their observable consequences for security arrangements, diplomatic bargaining, and the relative influence of other powers[11].

Institutional initiatives provide another route through which China may affect global influence. China remains engaged in established institutions, including the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, while also supporting or participating in newer arrangements such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB began operations in 2016 and had 109 approved members as of 2024, demonstrating that an institution initiated by China can attract participation well beyond its immediate region[12]. The institution's membership and operations do not, by themselves, prove that China controls its members or has displaced existing development banks. Rather, they raise questions about agenda-setting, governance, lending priorities, and the extent to which new institutions complement or alter established practices. China's institutional strategy may be understood as a combination of participation, reform advocacy, and institution-building. This combination complicates simple classifications of China as either a defender or a challenger of the status quo. The relevant issue is whether institutional activity changes who sets rules, whose preferences are reflected in decisions, and which forums states choose for cooperation. This study therefore examines the institutional effect on the distribution of global influence by considering both China's role within existing organizations and the consequences of institutions it has helped establish. Technology and normative action further extend this contest over influence beyond conventional diplomacy, trade, and military power. China is a major producer and market for digital technologies and has sought a larger role in international discussions on telecommunications, data governance, artificial intelligence, and technical standards. Its technological reach can create influence when infrastructure, platforms, or standards shape how governments and firms communicate and operate, it can also generate concern about security,

privacy, and dependence. Normative influence concerns the ability to promote, legitimize, or institutionalize ideas about how international affairs should be governed. Chinese official discourse commonly emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, development, and the centrality of state authority, while other states and institutions may prioritize different interpretations of human rights, transparency, or political accountability. These positions are not merely rhetorical: they can affect resolutions, policy language, regulatory choices, and coalitions in international forums. Still, adoption of a technology or repetition of a diplomatic phrase does not necessarily indicate acceptance of the associated political model. The study therefore distinguishes technological influence from technological capacity, and normative influence from the mere presentation of norms, asking whether either produces measurable shifts in international rules, practices, or alignments.

Territorial assertiveness is especially important because it links China's claims to sovereignty with the reactions of neighbouring states and major powers. Disputes involving Taiwan and maritime areas in the East and South China Seas have become focal points of regional security and international diplomacy. China's position on Taiwan is framed by Beijing as a core sovereignty issue, while other governments' policies reflect varied commitments to peace, stability, and existing arrangements. In the South China Sea, overlapping claims and activity at sea have prompted diplomatic protests, legal proceedings, military deployments, and regional cooperation. The 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling in the Philippines–China case found that there was no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for China to claim historic rights to resources within the relevant “nine-dash line” where those rights exceeded the convention's limits, China rejected the ruling, while the Philippines and other parties have invoked it in subsequent disputes[13]. Such cases demonstrate how territorial conduct may affect influence in opposing directions: assertive actions can strengthen a state's resolve and bargaining position, but can also encourage balancing, weaken perceptions of legitimacy, and deepen security partnerships among other states. The study accordingly examines territorial assertiveness as a distinct channel, rather than subsuming it under military power, because its effects operate through law, diplomacy, regional identity, and perceptions of legitimacy as well as coercive capability. Despite extensive scholarship and policy debate, a latent problem remains: research often examines China's economic rise, military modernization, institutional initiatives, or territorial disputes separately, making it difficult to determine how these channels jointly affect the distribution of global influence. A further difficulty is the tendency to infer influence from inputs such as spending, infrastructure finance, diplomatic visits, or institutional membership without consistently measuring outcomes in other states' behaviour, international rules, or governance arrangements. Stakeholders have responded through institutional reforms, development-finance alternatives, regional security partnerships, export controls, diplomatic engagement, and efforts to uphold international law. These measures have not yielded a settled assessment of China's influence: some have diversified financing and strengthened coordination, while strategic competition, uneven institutional performance, and disagreements among participating states continue to complicate their effects.

Statement of the Problem

China's rise has become one of the most consequential questions for contemporary global order because it combines a rapid increase in national capabilities with an explicit effort to secure greater influence in international affairs. The immediate problem informing this study is not simply that China has become more powerful, but that the extent and mechanisms through which its geopolitical ambitions are redistributing global influence remain insufficiently established. China's integration into the post-war international system has coincided with its pursuit of a larger role in shaping institutions, rules, security arrangements, and international norms. Scholars disagree over whether this development mainly reflects participation in an order that China continues to use, a campaign to reform that order, or a challenge to its underlying principles. This disagreement matters because governments and institutions must make decisions about cooperation, competition, and risk without a sufficiently integrated account of how China's diplomatic, economic, military, institutional, technological, normative, and territorial actions translate into influence. The problem, therefore, is a gap between the visible expansion of China's

geopolitical activity and the lack of a clear, comparative assessment of its effects on the distribution of global influence. The problem is topical and warrants empirical investigation because China's rise is continuing while strategic competition and disputes over the rules of international conduct are intensifying. China's share of world GDP at current prices increased from roughly 3.6 percent in 2000 to about 17 percent in 2023, its GDP reached approximately US\$17.8 trillion in 2023. In the same year, SIPRI estimated its military expenditure at US\$296 billion, second only to that of the United States. Juxtaposed, these figures show a substantial change in the material resources available to China, but they do not establish how much influence has shifted or whether that shift is accepted, resisted, or limited by other states. The situation ought to be one in which changes in global influence are assessed using evidence of outcomes such as shifts in diplomatic support, institutional rules, security alignments, technological standards, and state behaviour rather than inferred from national wealth or military spending alone. The present situation is less satisfactory: public debate often treats China's growing capabilities as proof of either inevitable dominance or an imminent challenge to the existing order, even though influence is multidimensional and contested. This analytical uncertainty is especially significant amid continuing tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea, disagreements about economic dependence and technology security, and competing claims about sovereignty and international norms.

The central empirical difficulty is that the principal channels through which China may affect global influence are often studied separately, although they can operate together or produce contradictory effects. Diplomatically, China may gain influence through partnerships, multilateral participation, coalition-building, and agenda-setting, the relevant question is whether these activities change other governments' choices or the outcomes of international forums. Economically, trade, investment, lending, and infrastructure initiatives may increase access and bargaining power, but economic ties do not automatically produce political alignment. Militarily, modernization may enhance deterrence and bargaining leverage, while also encouraging other states to strengthen security partnerships or balance against China. Institutionally, China's participation in established organizations and support for new institutions may alter representation, priorities, or rules, but membership growth alone does not demonstrate control. Technologically, the adoption of Chinese systems or standards may shape infrastructure and governance, yet adoption can reflect cost or availability rather than political influence. Normative action may affect the legitimacy of principles such as sovereignty and non-interference, while territorial assertiveness may strengthen claims in the short term but undermine legitimacy or prompt counter-coalitions. The problem this study addresses is therefore how to distinguish the separate and combined effects of these seven dimensions on the distribution of global influence, rather than treating China's rise as a single, self-explanatory process.

Previous researchers have made important contributions by examining China's relationship with the existing international order, its compliance and contestation within institutions, its military rise, and the strategic consequences of great-power competition. These studies have clarified that China is neither simply outside the existing system nor uniformly satisfied with it. However, their findings have not yielded a settled empirical answer to the present problem. Much of the literature concentrates on particular domains, relies on broad interpretations of "challenge" or "revisionism," or measures capabilities and initiatives without consistently establishing whether these produce changes in other states' behaviour, institutional outcomes, or international rules. Consequently, it remains difficult to compare the influence generated through diplomacy with that arising from economic statecraft, military capability, institutional entrepreneurship, technology, normative advocacy, or territorial conduct. Nor is it always clear whether apparent gains represent durable influence, temporary bargaining advantages, or reactions that provoke resistance. This unresolved measurement and integration problem limits the ability of scholarship and policymakers to assess whether China is reshaping global order, adapting to it, or generating countervailing responses that preserve existing distributions of influence. If this problem is not investigated, analysis and policy may continue to rely on incomplete or misleading assumptions: that economic size necessarily creates political obedience, that military growth necessarily produces control, or that participation in new institutions necessarily signals the displacement of established ones. Such

assumptions could lead to ineffective engagement, unnecessary escalation, or inadequate preparation for changes in international governance and security. Accordingly, this study examines the effect of China's geopolitical ambitions on the distribution of global influence by assessing seven dimensions: diplomatic action, economic statecraft, military capability, institutional activity, technological influence, normative action, and territorial assertiveness. Its purpose is to establish how each dimension contributes to changes in influence, and whether their effects reinforce or constrain one another. By focusing on observable outcomes rather than capability alone, the study seeks to address the gap between China's demonstrable rise and the still-contested evidence about what that rise means for global order. The investigation is therefore necessary both for a more precise scholarly account of China's international role and for informed decisions by states and institutions responding to an evolving distribution of power.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine China's geopolitical ambitions and global order. The specific objectives are to:

- a) Ascertain the effect of diplomatic on distribution of global influence
- b) Determine the effect of economic on distribution of global influence
- c) Evaluate the effect of military on distribution of global influence
- d) Examine the effect of institutional on distribution of global influence
- e) Ascertain the effect of technological on distribution of global influence
- f) Determine the effect of normative action on distribution of global influence
- g) Evaluate the effect of territorial assertiveness on distribution of global influence

China's Strategic Vision and National Rejuvenation

China's strategic vision is commonly framed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through the concept of "national rejuvenation": restoring China's wealth, strength, and international standing after a period officially characterized as national humiliation and weakness. This vision connects domestic development and political legitimacy with a stronger international role. Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress presents national rejuvenation as a long-term objective and links it to modernization, national security, and China's contribution to global governance[14]. Conceptually, this framing matters because it makes foreign policy more than a set of responses to individual events: it situates diplomacy, economic policy, military modernization, and institutional engagement within a wider account of China's desired place in the world. The idea of rejuvenation does not, by itself, establish that China seeks to replace the existing international order. A useful conceptual distinction is between status-seeking, order reform, and order replacement. Status-seeking involves securing recognition and influence commensurate with China's capabilities, order reform involves changing rules or institutions while retaining significant elements of the existing system, replacement would entail constructing a substantially different order. Recent scholarship cautions against treating China's behaviour as uniformly revisionist, since Beijing both participates in established institutions and contests particular rules, practices, or distributions of authority[15]. The concept of strategic vision is therefore best assessed through observable policies and outcomes rather than inferred solely from official rhetoric.

National rejuvenation also connects China's domestic political priorities to its external behaviour. The leadership's emphasis on development, social stability, technological self-reliance, and national security affects how it evaluates international dependence and exposure to external pressure. This connection became especially visible as U.S.–China competition expanded into trade, advanced technology, investment screening, and supply-chain security. The concept of "comprehensive national security" broadens the range of issues treated as security concerns, linking economic and technological resilience to political and territorial security[16]. Consequently, China's strategic vision may shape global influence not only through outward-facing initiatives, but also through domestic policies that strengthen or

constrain its capacity to act internationally.

For this study, China's strategic vision is treated as an overarching orientation that may inform several distinct channels of influence. It is not itself a measurable outcome: its effects must be examined through diplomatic conduct, economic statecraft, military capability, institutional activity, technology policy, normative advocacy, and territorial behaviour. This approach avoids equating stated ambitions with achieved influence. It also enables analysis of possible tensions within the vision - for example, between seeking international recognition and actions that generate distrust, or between promoting connectivity and reducing dependence on foreign technology. The concept is therefore useful as context for explaining why China pursues particular instruments, while the study's empirical focus remains on whether those instruments alter the distribution of global influence.

Economic Statecraft and Global Connectivity

Economic statecraft refers to the use of economic resources and relationships to advance political or strategic objectives. Its instruments include trade access, investment, development finance, sanctions, export controls, and the management of critical supply chains. Global connectivity, by contrast, concerns the networks that link states through transport, energy, digital infrastructure, trade, and finance. These concepts overlap when connectivity creates economic opportunities while also affecting bargaining relationships, dependence, or access. Recent research on economic coercion emphasizes that the political effects of economic ties depend on the target's vulnerability, the availability of alternatives, and the credibility of the sender's threat - not simply on the volume of trade[17][18]. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is a major example of connectivity-oriented economic statecraft. It has supported transport, energy, and other infrastructure projects across regions, while providing Chinese firms and financial institutions with opportunities to operate internationally. The World Bank's assessment identifies potential gains from improved transport connectivity, including lower trade costs, but also stresses that outcomes depend on project selection, debt management, transparency, and environmental and social safeguards. Thus, BRI participation should not be treated as evidence of political alignment by itself. Its implications for influence depend on whether projects create durable economic benefits, deepen reliance on Chinese finance or technology, or prompt recipient governments to adjust their external policies.

Economic connectivity can redistribute influence through several mechanisms. Infrastructure may shape trade routes and access to markets, lending may increase a state's ability to finance development, and supply-chain centrality may give country leverage when critical goods are difficult to replace. Farrell and Newman's account of "weaponized interdependence" explains how states positioned at important network nodes can use informational or economic advantages for coercive purposes. However, network centrality can also create costs for the state exercising leverage: partners may diversify suppliers, build alternative routes, or impose countermeasures. Economic statecraft therefore has potentially contradictory effects - it can create influence through access and dependence while simultaneously stimulating resistance and strategic diversification. In this study, economic statecraft and global connectivity are treated as related but distinct concepts. Connectivity describes the networks and infrastructure through which economic interaction occurs, statecraft concerns how governments use or manage those relationships for strategic purposes. The economic dimension of influence will therefore be understood not as China's GDP or trade volume alone, but as the extent to which economic relationships affect other states' choices, bargaining positions, or participation in international arrangements. This distinction is important because economic growth is a resource for influence, not proof that influence has been achieved. It also allows consideration of both gains and constraints, including recipient agency, project performance, alternative financing, and the possibility of counterbalancing.

Diplomatic Influence and the Distribution of Global Influence

Diplomatic influence is the capacity to shape other actors' preferences, decisions, or the outcomes of international forums through representation, negotiation, coalition-building, mediation, and agenda-

setting. It differs from diplomatic activity: the number of visits, agreements, or official statements measures engagement, but not necessarily its effect. To assess influence, research must ask whether diplomatic action changes the language of resolutions, helps secure support for a position, affects the behaviour of partners, or alters the options considered in negotiations. This distinction is central to examining China's diplomatic expansion, since a broader diplomatic presence may coexist with limited persuasion or with resistance from other states[19][20][21]. China's diplomacy operates through bilateral relations and multilateral forums, including the United Nations, the G20, and regional organizations. Beijing has also promoted initiatives and diplomatic narratives that emphasize development, sovereignty, and a more representative system of global governance. Its diplomatic influence may increase when partners support its proposals, adopt compatible positions, or rely on China as a negotiating partner. Yet diplomatic relationships are not necessarily exclusive: states may maintain extensive ties with China while also cooperating with the United States, Europe, or regional powers. Consequently, diplomatic reach should be assessed in terms of specific outcomes and issue areas rather than assumed to represent a general transfer of allegiance.

Diplomacy can redistribute global influence by helping a state build coalitions and shape the perceived legitimacy of its positions. Coalition-building can be particularly consequential in multilateral bodies where voting, agenda control, or negotiated wording depends on support from multiple governments. Diplomatic initiatives may also generate influence by offering mediation, convening negotiations, or providing public goods. However, outcomes depend on credibility, consistency, and the preferences of other participants. A state may gain short-term support on one issue but lose trust on another, alternatively, its diplomatic efforts may encourage counter-coalitions. Diplomatic influence is therefore relational, issue-specific, and potentially reversible rather than a direct consequence of diplomatic resources alone[22][23]. For this study, the diplomatic dimension concerns the effect of China's diplomatic actions on the distribution of global influence. Relevant indicators may include changes in partner support, participation in Chinese-led initiatives, coalition patterns, agenda-setting success, and the extent to which China's preferred positions are reflected in negotiated outcomes. These indicators should be interpreted alongside competing explanations, including shared interests, economic incentives, or opposition to other powers. Such an approach avoids confusing diplomatic visibility with persuasion and makes it possible to distinguish influence gained through cooperation from support that is transactional or temporary. It also allows the study to identify conditions under which China's diplomacy generates influence, and circumstances in which its effects are limited.

Economic Influence and the Distribution of Global Influence

Economic influence is the ability to affect other actors' choices or the distribution of international power through economic resources and relationships. It can arise from market size, trade dependence, access to finance, investment, control over critical inputs, or a central position in supply networks. These resources can provide bargaining leverage, but they do not automatically produce political compliance. The economic relationship must be translated into an outcome - for example, a policy adjustment, a changed negotiating position, or a decision to avoid actions that could jeopardize access to a market or source of finance. This conceptual distinction separates economic capacity from economic influence. China's economic rise has increased the potential scale of its influence. World Bank data show that China's GDP at current prices grew from approximately US\$1.2 trillion in 2000 to about US\$17.8 trillion in 2023, while China became a major participant in global merchandise trade. The expansion of trade, investment, and infrastructure finance has created extensive connections with other economies. Yet aggregate figures do not reveal whether individual partners are dependent, whether they can substitute other markets or lenders, or whether economic ties influence their foreign-policy decisions. Economic influence must therefore be examined at the level of relationships and outcomes, not inferred directly from national economic size.

Economic influence can operate through both positive inducements and coercive pressure. Finance and investment may support development, strengthen relationships, and create incentives for continued

cooperation. Conversely, restrictions on imports, tourism, or investment can impose costs on a target government. Farrell and Newman's analysis of network power helps explain why states occupying central positions in trade and financial networks may gain leverage, while also identifying the risk that coercive use of such positions encourages others to create alternative networks. The effectiveness of economic measures depends on the target's vulnerability, the importance of the relationship, and the availability of substitutes. Their consequences may include compliance, adaptation, diversification, or political backlash. The economic dimension of this study therefore examines whether China's economic relationships contribute to measurable shifts in global influence. Relevant questions include whether trade or finance changes partner behaviour, whether connectivity projects strengthen China's role in regional networks, and whether economic pressure produces policy concessions or countermeasures. The analysis must also account for recipient agency and the possibility that economic cooperation reflects mutual benefit rather than strategic dependence. By distinguishing economic resources, instruments, and outcomes, the study can assess when China's economic position translates into influence and when its effects are limited by diversification, domestic politics, or resistance.

Military Influence and the Distribution of Global Influence

Military influence is the ability to shape other states' calculations through military capability, security partnerships, deterrence, coercion, or the provision of security. It is not equivalent to military size. A state may possess substantial forces but fail to achieve its political objectives, while a smaller force may exert influence through credible deterrence or a strategically important alliance. Military influence is therefore best understood through the relationship between capability and political effect: whether military resources alter the perceived costs of resistance, reassure partners, deter intervention, or affect the terms of bargaining. China's military modernization has expanded its ability to operate across domains, including maritime, air, missile, space, and cyber capabilities. SIPRI estimated China's military expenditure at approximately US\$296 billion in 2023, the second-highest national total globally. This figure indicates the scale of resources devoted to defense but does not provide a direct measure of operational effectiveness or political influence. Differences in accounting, purchasing power, force structure, and strategic objectives complicate comparisons. The significance of military modernization lies in how it changes regional military balances, affects the credibility of deterrence, and influences the security policies of neighboring states and external powers.

Military capabilities can redistribute influence by changing the risks attached to particular actions. A stronger capacity to deny access or impose costs may increase bargaining leverage and deter intervention. Military presence and security cooperation can also strengthen relationships with partners. However, military expansion may prompt counterbalancing, increased defense spending, or closer security cooperation among states concerned about China's intentions. It may also increase the risk of miscalculation, particularly where territorial claims and military operations overlap. Military influence can thus produce both direct leverage and indirect costs, its net effect depends on whether deterrence and reassurance outweigh the balancing and distrust that capability growth may generate. This study examines the military effect on the distribution of global influence by focusing on observable changes in deterrence, security alignments, bargaining outcomes, and regional strategic behaviour. Military expenditure and modernization are relevant inputs, but they must be connected to outcomes to establish influence. The analysis should also distinguish military coercion from security cooperation and consider how military actions interact with diplomacy and territorial disputes. This approach makes it possible to assess whether China's growing military capacity increases its ability to shape others' choices, or whether it stimulates responses that constrain its influence. It also avoids assuming that military power translates automatically into political control.

Institutional Influence and the Distribution of Global Influence

Institutional influence is the capacity to shape the rules, procedures, priorities, and decisions of international organizations. It can be exercised through membership, leadership positions, voting coalitions, financial contributions, agenda-setting, and the creation of new institutions. Institutions matter

because they structure cooperation and determine which actors participate in decision-making. However, participation does not necessarily equal control. Influence depends on whether a state can secure its preferred outcomes, change institutional practices, or make alternative forums attractive to other governments. This distinction is essential in assessing China's role in global governance. China participates in established institutions, including the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, while also supporting new or complementary bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB began operations in 2016 and has attracted a membership extending beyond Asia, illustrating that an institution initiated by China can gain broad international participation.

Yet membership alone does not show that China directs members' policies or that the bank has displaced existing development institutions. Institutional influence must be assessed through governance arrangements, lending decisions, operational standards, and the extent to which the institution changes the options available to its participants.

Institution-building can affect global influence by creating new forums, diversifying sources of finance, and altering the distribution of voice in international decision-making. It may also allow the sponsoring state to promote priorities or practices that differ from those of established institutions. At the same time, new organizations often rely on existing expertise, professional standards, and cooperation with other institutions. Their influence may therefore be complementary rather than revolutionary. The effects depend on institutional design, member participation, operational performance, and the degree to which other states regard the institution as legitimate and useful. The institutional dimension of this study examines whether China's participation in existing organizations and support for new institutions changes the distribution of global influence. Relevant evidence includes changes in representation, decision-making practices, policy priorities, and the choices of member states. The analysis should distinguish institutional presence from institutional outcomes and consider whether changes reflect China's preferences, broader member coalitions, or practical responses to unmet needs. This enables a more precise assessment of whether China is reshaping global governance, supplementing existing arrangements, or gaining influence within them without fundamentally altering their rules.

Technological Influence and the Distribution of Global Influence

Technological influence is the ability to shape other states' choices, standards, or governance practices through control of technology, technological infrastructure, innovation, or technical expertise. It may arise from the supply of telecommunications equipment, digital platforms, semiconductors, artificial-intelligence systems, or other critical technologies. Influence can also operate through standards-setting bodies, where technical specifications determine how systems interoperate and which firms or countries gain advantages. Technological capacity is not, however, equivalent to technological influence: the latter depends on adoption, dependence, rule-making, and the political consequences of technological relationships[24]. China's technological ambitions are connected to its broader objectives of modernization and reduced vulnerability to external restrictions. Its technology sector has expanded rapidly, while U.S. measures have sought to restrict China's access to some advanced computing and semiconductor technologies. In October 2022, the U.S. Department of Commerce introduced controls on certain advanced computing items and semiconductor-manufacturing equipment destined for China, illustrating how technology has become an instrument of strategic competition. These developments affect global influence because technology supply chains are international: decisions about access, standards, and markets can shape the choices of governments and firms well beyond the two countries directly involved.

Technological influence may be generated through several mechanisms. A widely adopted system can create long-term technical dependence, a state that contributes to international standards can shape the rules governing future markets, and control of critical supply-chain nodes can provide bargaining leverage. Yet these mechanisms can also produce countermeasures. Governments concerned about security or dependence may restrict suppliers, diversify infrastructure, or develop domestic alternatives. The result may be fragmented technological ecosystems rather than a single state's dominance.

Technological influence is thus contingent on cost, performance, trust, compatibility, and the ability of other actors to develop alternatives[25]. This study treats technological influence as a distinct dimension because it can affect the distribution of global influence through standards and infrastructure as well as through commercial success. It examines whether Chinese technologies or standards shape other states' regulatory decisions, digital systems, or international alignments, while recognizing that adoption may be driven by practical considerations rather than political agreement. The analysis should also consider how export controls and supply-chain restrictions alter China's technological position and encourage diversification. This makes it possible to assess both the influence China gains through technological connectivity and the constraints produced by security concerns and competing systems.

Normative Action and the Distribution of Global Influence

Normative action refers to efforts to promote, defend, or institutionalize ideas about legitimate political conduct and international governance. Norms can concern sovereignty, non-interference, human rights, development, the use of force, or the responsibilities of states. Normative influence occurs when other actors adopt these principles, incorporate them into rules, or use them to justify policy. It is distinct from rhetoric: a government's declaration of a principle does not establish that the principle has gained international acceptance or changed behaviour. The analytical task is to trace how ideas move from official statements into negotiations, institutional language, and state practice[26][27][28][29]. China's official discourse emphasizes principles including sovereignty, non-interference, development, and a more representative international system. These positions can appeal to governments concerned about external intervention or unequal representation in global governance. They may also contest interpretations of international norms associated with liberal political values or human-rights protections. China's normative activity therefore operates both through advocacy within established forums and through efforts to shape how international problems are framed. Its influence depends on whether other states find these ideas persuasive, useful, or compatible with their own interests, rather than merely on China's capacity to promote them.

Normative action can redistribute global influence by affecting the legitimacy of policies and the standards used to judge state conduct. If a principle gains wider acceptance, it can change the language of resolutions, influence diplomatic coalitions, and alter the perceived costs of particular actions. Normative influence may also reinforce institutional or economic influence by presenting a state's initiatives as legitimate and beneficial. However, norms can be contested, applied selectively, or interpreted differently across contexts. Actions perceived as inconsistent with a state's stated principles may weaken its credibility, while competing interpretations may prevent any one actor from establishing a dominant normative position.

For this study, the normative dimension concerns the effect of China's normative actions on the distribution of global influence. Evidence may include the uptake of Chinese-preferred language in international documents, support for related proposals, changes in institutional practices, and the extent to which other governments invoke similar principles. Such evidence must be interpreted carefully: agreement on a phrase does not necessarily indicate agreement on its meaning or a durable change in political behaviour. By distinguishing advocacy, acceptance, and implementation, the study can assess whether China's normative activity produces measurable influence or remains primarily a statement of preference.

Territorial Assertiveness and the Distribution of Global Influence

Territorial assertiveness refers to actions through which a state advances or defends territorial claims, exercises authority, or seeks to change the practical situation in disputed areas. It may involve diplomatic declarations, administrative measures, maritime activity, military deployments, or the construction and use of facilities. Territorial disputes are especially consequential because they concern sovereignty and national identity as well as access to strategic locations and resources. Their effects on global influence extend beyond the territory itself: they can influence perceptions of a state's resolve, its commitment to

international law, and the credibility of security arrangements. China's territorial disputes include the question of Taiwan and overlapping maritime claims in the East and South China Seas. These issues are central to regional security and diplomacy because they involve China, neighboring states, and, in some cases, major external powers. In its 2016 award in the South China Sea arbitration initiated by the Philippines, the tribunal concluded that there was no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for China to claim historic rights to resources within the relevant "nine-dash line" where those rights exceeded the convention's limits. China rejected the award, while the Philippines and other parties have continued to invoke it in diplomatic and legal discussions. The case illustrates how territorial conduct can become a dispute over both control and the authority of international law.

Territorial assertiveness can increase influence if it changes facts on the ground or at sea, strengthens bargaining leverage, or signals a willingness to bear costs in defense of a claim. But it may also undermine influence by damaging perceptions of legitimacy and encouraging other states to coordinate against the asserting state. The effect is therefore not reducible to territorial control. It includes shifts in diplomatic support, regional security cooperation, legal arguments, and the willingness of other governments to accept or resist the state's preferred outcome. Territorial actions may thus yield immediate strategic advantages while imposing longer-term reputational or coalition-building costs[30][31]. This study examines territorial assertiveness as a distinct dimension of China's geopolitical ambitions because its influence operates through law, diplomacy, security, and perceptions of resolve in addition to military capability. It asks whether territorial actions change other states' behaviour, affect regional alignments, or alter the practical and legal terms of disputes. The analysis must distinguish actions that produce durable changes from those that trigger countermeasures or remain contested. This approach allows the study to evaluate whether territorial assertiveness increases China's influence overall, or whether its effects are offset by reputational costs and balancing responses.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Case Selection

This study uses a qualitative content analysis design to examine how China's geopolitical ambitions are represented and enacted across diplomatic, economic, military, institutional, technological, normative, and territorial domains and how these may affect the distribution of global influence. Content analysis is appropriate because the study focuses on systematically interpreting documentary material, identifying recurring concepts and strategies, and comparing how China's actions and their international consequences are described across sources. The analysis combines deductive coding, based on the study's seven dimensions, with inductive coding to capture relevant themes not anticipated in advance.

China is selected as the central case because of its substantial growth in economic and military capabilities, its active participation in existing international institutions, and its efforts to expand international connectivity and influence. The study treats the country as a single case, with its seven geopolitical dimensions serving as embedded analytical categories. It also uses selected episodes such as Belt and Road Initiative activities, participation in multilateral institutions, technological restrictions and competition, military modernization, and territorial disputes as illustrative sub-cases. These episodes are selected for their relevance to the study's research questions, their international significance, and the availability of credible documentary evidence. They are not intended to represent every aspect of China's foreign policy.

Time Period and Scope of Analysis

The principal period of analysis is 2013–2025. The starting point captures the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative and the beginning of Xi Jinping's leadership, both of which provide important context for China's contemporary strategic vision. The end point is 2025, the latest complete calendar year before the stated current date of 2026. Earlier material may be consulted where necessary to establish historical

context, particularly for China's changing role in international institutions and its economic and military development.

The study focuses on China's external geopolitical activity and its potential effects on global influence. "Global influence" is assessed through documentary evidence of changes in other states' positions or behaviour, international institutional outcomes, diplomatic support, economic relationships, security responses, technological standards, normative language, and the management of territorial disputes. The study does not attempt to measure influence through a single numerical index, nor does it claim that documentary evidence alone can establish causal effects. Instead, it compares evidence across the seven analytical dimensions and considers alternative interpretations, including partner-state interests, domestic politics, and responses by other major powers.

Sources and Data Collection

Data were collected from publicly accessible primary and secondary documents. Primary sources include official Chinese policy documents, speeches, government statements, laws, and foreign-policy publications, documents and records from international organizations, and relevant statements or policy documents from other governments. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic books and articles, reports from established research institutes, and carefully selected datasets or background publications from organizations such as the World Bank, SIPRI, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Documents were selected purposively according to their relevance to the research questions, the period covered, the authority or credibility of the source, and the availability of sufficient detail for analysis. Search terms include combinations of "China," "global influence," "diplomacy," "economic statecraft," "military modernization," "international institutions," "technology," "norms," and "territorial disputes." Each document was recorded in a source log noting its author or issuing organization, date, type, topic, and relevance. Where possible, claims in official documents were compared with independent reporting, academic research, or institutional data to reduce reliance on any single source or perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses neoclassical realism as its principal theoretical framework. Neoclassical realism explains how changes in a state's position in the international system shape its foreign-policy ambitions, while also emphasizing that systemic pressures do not translate into policy automatically. Their effects are filtered through leaders' perceptions, state institutions, and the resources governments can mobilize. This makes the approach suitable for examining China's geopolitical ambitions across diplomatic, economic, military, institutional, technological, normative, and territorial domains.

Neoclassical realism emerged as a distinct approach in the work of Gideon Rose[32] who identified a new body of scholarship combining systemic pressures with domestic-level explanations of foreign policy. Its intellectual foundations include classical realism, especially Hans Morgenthau's account of power and political judgment[33] and structural realism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's argument that the international system's distribution of capabilities constrains state behaviour[34]. Later contributions developed the approach's account of how domestic institutions and leaders mediate systemic pressures[35][36].

Neoclassical realism is not a theory that predicts a single inevitable outcome, such as China's rise necessarily producing conflict or replacing the existing order. Instead, it provides a framework for explaining how China's relative capabilities, perceptions of its international position, domestic priorities, and capacity to implement policy combine to shape its external conduct. The study therefore uses the theory to organize and interpret documentary evidence, rather than to assume in advance that China's actions have succeeded in redistributing global influence.

Proponents of the theory and year

Hans J. Morgenthau is an important classical realist precursor. In *Politics Among Nations*, he emphasized

power, national interest, and the role of political judgment in international affairs. Classical realism provides the theoretical foundation for treating geopolitical influence as a matter of power and political interaction, while recognizing that state conduct is not determined by material capabilities alone.

Kenneth N. Waltz developed structural realism, or neorealism, in *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz argued that the structure of the international system especially the distribution of capabilities among states constrains their behaviour. Neoclassical realism retains this systemic focus but adds domestic and perceptual factors to explain why states exposed to similar pressures may respond differently.

Gideon Rose coined the term neoclassical realism in his review of post-Cold War realist foreign-policy scholarship. Rose's central contribution was to define an approach in which a state's relative material power provides the starting point for analysis, but its foreign policy is also shaped by leaders' perceptions and the domestic processes through which state power is mobilized.

Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro advanced the approach by examining how domestic institutions, political coalitions, and state-society relations mediate systemic pressures. Their work clarifies that a state's international resources do not automatically become usable foreign-policy power.

Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell provided a systematic formulation of neoclassical realist theory. They distinguish between systemic stimuli, intervening domestic variables, and foreign-policy outcomes, and explain how the approach can be used to analyze both foreign-policy behaviour and international outcomes.

Assumptions of the theory

The study draws on the following assumptions of neoclassical realism:

The international system constrains states. States operate in an anarchic system without a central authority capable of reliably guaranteeing their security. The distribution of material capabilities affects the opportunities and risks they face.

Relative power matters, not only absolute resources. A state's capabilities are significant partly in relation to those of other states. Changes in relative economic, military, and technological capacity can alter a state's perceived position and strategic options.

Systemic pressures do not determine foreign policy directly. States do not respond mechanically to changes in power or threats. Leaders interpret external conditions, and their perceptions may be incomplete, contested, or mistaken.

Domestic factors mediate the translation of resources into policy. Political institutions, elite priorities, state capacity, and relationships between the state and society affect which policies are selected and whether they can be implemented. Material resources are therefore not equivalent to usable national power.

States seek to protect and advance their interests under uncertainty. Neoclassical realism expects states to respond to perceived opportunities and vulnerabilities, but it does not assume that all states pursue the same strategy or seek unlimited expansion. Their choices depend on how leaders understand the international environment and domestic constraints.

Foreign-policy outcomes must be distinguished from intentions and capabilities. A state may announce ambitions, acquire resources, or undertake initiatives without achieving the intended international effect. Analysis should therefore separate objectives, instruments, and outcomes.

The relationship between power and influence is conditional. Material capabilities can provide leverage, but influence depends on how other states respond and on the political, institutional, and strategic circumstances in which power is used. A policy may generate cooperation in one context and resistance in another.

Applications of the theory to the study

Neoclassical realism provides a framework for linking China's changing international position to its geopolitical activity. The study treats China's economic, military, and technological resources as important systemic capabilities, while examining how Chinese leaders interpret the country's international position and how domestic priorities shape policy choices. This enables the analysis to connect China's strategic vision and national rejuvenation to observable policies without treating official statements as direct proof of either intention or success.

The theory also helps organize the study's seven dimensions of influence. Diplomacy, economic statecraft, military modernization, institutional engagement, technology policy, normative advocacy, and territorial behaviour are treated as different instruments through which China may pursue its interests. Neoclassical realism directs attention to the resources supporting these instruments, the strategic pressures they respond to, and the domestic conditions affecting their use. For example, economic scale may create opportunities for investment and connectivity, but the conversion of economic resources into political leverage depends on the choices of partner states and the effectiveness of China's policies.

The framework further supports analysis of the distribution of global influence by requiring a distinction between capability, policy, and outcome. China's economic growth or military expenditure indicates resources, infrastructure finance, diplomatic initiatives, and military deployments are policy instruments, changes in other states' behaviour or in international arrangements are potential outcomes. Evidence of influence should therefore be sought in documented responses, such as shifts in diplomatic support, bargaining positions, institutional practices, security alignments, or regulatory choices. Where the documentary record shows opposition, diversification, or counterbalancing, these should be analyzed as limits or unintended effects rather than omitted.

Finally, neoclassical realism is compatible with the study's qualitative content-analysis design. Its concepts can guide deductive coding for systemic pressures, material capabilities, leadership perceptions, domestic priorities, policy instruments, and outcomes. Inductive coding can then capture themes that emerge from the documents. This provides a structured way to compare the seven dimensions while allowing the analysis to account for variation across issues and cases. The framework does not presume that China's actions will necessarily produce a more China-centered global order, it helps explain the conditions under which those actions may increase influence, fail to do so, or provoke responses that constrain it.

Limitations of the theory

A central limitation of neoclassical realism is that its variables can be difficult to identify and measure consistently. Concepts such as leaders' perceptions, state capacity, and domestic constraints are not always directly observable, particularly when the study relies on public documents. Official statements may present strategic positions without revealing internal disagreements or private calculations. As a result, the analysis must avoid treating public rhetoric as a transparent record of decision-making and should distinguish documented evidence from interpretation.

The theory can also risk becoming overly flexible. Because it incorporates systemic conditions, leadership perceptions, and domestic factors, it may be possible to explain a wide range of outcomes after they occur. This creates a risk of post hoc reasoning unless the study specifies in advance what evidence would support or challenge its explanations. To reduce this problem, the analysis should define its categories clearly, distinguish intentions from outcomes, and include evidence of resistance or failure alongside evidence of influence.

Neoclassical realism's focus on states and power may understate the independent role of non-state actors, transnational firms, international organizations, and social movements. These actors can shape technological standards, economic networks, and public legitimacy in ways that are not fully captured by

a state-centered framework. The study therefore treats neoclassical realism as its primary explanatory lens, while recognizing that its documentary evidence may reveal processes such as corporate supply-chain decisions or institutional rule-making that require attention beyond state intentions.

Finally, neoclassical realism is better suited to explaining foreign-policy behaviour than to providing a complete theory of international order or normative change. It can help explain why China uses particular instruments and how capabilities and domestic conditions shape those choices, but it does not by itself fully explain why some norms gain legitimacy, how institutional rules acquire authority, or how non-material ideas shape political preferences. The study addresses this limitation by examining normative and institutional evidence as part of the empirical analysis, while avoiding claims that neoclassical realism alone explains every dimension of China's relationship with global order.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The review indicates that China's diplomatic influence should be assessed through outcomes rather than the scale of its diplomatic activity. Its participation in bilateral relations and multilateral forums, and its promotion of development- and sovereignty-centered narratives, create opportunities to shape agendas and build coalitions. However, diplomatic presence does not by itself demonstrate persuasion or a general shift in other states' alignment. As Johnston argues, China's influence varies by issue and context, states may cooperate with Beijing on some matters while maintaining relationships with other major powers. Thus, evidence of influence should include changes in negotiated language, partner behaviour, coalition support, or forum outcomes, while accounting for shared interests and temporary or transactional support.

The economic review finds that China's large economy and extensive trade and investment relationships provide potential sources of leverage, but economic scale alone cannot establish political influence. The growth of China's GDP and its role in global trade demonstrate increased capacity, not necessarily the ability to secure policy concessions. Farrell and Newman's account of network power helps explain how central positions in economic networks can create leverage, while also showing why coercive use of that leverage may encourage diversification and alternative networks. The findings therefore point to a conditional relationship: economic influence is most plausible where partners are vulnerable, the relationship is difficult to replace, and economic instruments produce observable changes in decisions. Recipient agency and mutual benefit remain important alternative explanations.

The military findings similarly suggest that capability and influence must be distinguished. China's rising military expenditure and modernization increase its ability to affect regional calculations, but they do not demonstrate that it has achieved particular political objectives. Military power may strengthen deterrence, increase bargaining leverage, or reassure partners, it may also prompt balancing, defense cooperation among concerned states, and greater distrust. This dual effect is consistent with the distinction between military resources and political outcomes emphasized in strategic analysis. Accordingly, the review supports evaluating influence through changes in deterrence, security alignments, and bargaining behaviour, rather than relying on expenditure or force size alone.

Institutionally, China's participation in established organizations and support for new bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) appear to expand its opportunities to shape governance and diversify the forums available to states. The AIIB's broad membership demonstrates that a China-initiated institution can attract international participation, but membership does not establish Chinese control over its decisions or the displacement of existing institutions. Institutional influence depends on governance arrangements, operational practices, member preferences, and whether China's priorities are reflected in outcomes. The review therefore suggests that China's institutional role may be complementary as well as competitive: it can broaden available options and increase China's presence without necessarily transforming the underlying rules of global governance.

The technological findings show that technology has become a significant arena of geopolitical

competition because infrastructure, standards, and supply-chain positions can shape other actors' choices. China's technological development may increase its influence when its systems are adopted, its standards gain acceptance, or its firms occupy important positions in networks. Yet adoption may reflect cost, performance, or availability rather than political alignment, and concerns about security or dependence can motivate restrictions and diversification. The 2022 U.S. export controls on advanced computing and semiconductor-related items illustrate how access to critical technologies can itself become a strategic instrument. The review thus indicates that technological influence is contested and potentially fragmented, rather than an automatic consequence of innovation or market presence.

The normative findings suggest that China's advocacy of sovereignty, non-interference, development, and a more representative global system can resonate with states that share these concerns or view existing governance arrangements as unequal. Such advocacy may shape diplomatic language and institutional debate, but rhetorical repetition does not prove that a norm has been accepted or implemented. A stronger indication of normative influence would be the incorporation of preferred language into agreements, changes in institutional practice, or sustained adoption by other governments. Normative influence is also vulnerable to questions of credibility and competing interpretations: states may endorse a principle in general while disagreeing about its application. The review therefore supports separating advocacy, acceptance, and implementation when assessing China's influence.

Finally, the review finds that territorial assertiveness has effects extending beyond control of disputed areas. Actions concerning Taiwan and maritime disputes may signal resolve and alter the practical conditions of a dispute, potentially increasing bargaining leverage. At the same time, they can generate diplomatic opposition, security cooperation among concerned states, and reputational costs. The 2016 South China Sea arbitration illustrates this interaction between territorial claims and the legitimacy of international legal rules: the tribunal rejected a legal basis for certain historic-rights claims under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, while China rejected the award [37][38]. Taken together, the seven dimensions show that China's geopolitical influence is multidimensional but uneven: gains in one area may be limited or offset by resistance in another. This supports assessing influence through specific, observable outcomes and considering both the intended effects of Chinese policies and the responses they provoke.

Summary of Findings

The review finds that China's influence in the global order is multidimensional, uneven, and dependent on the responses of other actors. Across diplomacy, economics, military affairs, institutions, technology, norms, and territorial disputes, China has expanded its capacity to shape international choices. However, increased capacity, activity, or visibility does not by itself establish that China has achieved influence. Influence is better demonstrated by observable changes in other actors' behaviour, negotiated outcomes, institutional practices, or international alignments.

Diplomatically, China's growing presence in bilateral and multilateral forums gives it opportunities to build coalitions, promote preferred language, and influence agendas. Yet diplomatic engagement does not necessarily produce lasting persuasion or exclusive alignment. States may support China on particular issues while maintaining relationships with other powers. Diplomatic influence is therefore issue-specific and should be assessed through concrete outcomes such as negotiated wording, voting behaviour, and partner responses.

Economically, China's market size, trade relationships, investment, and finance provide potential sources of leverage. But economic capacity does not automatically translate into political compliance. The extent of influence depends on partners' exposure, the availability of alternatives, and whether economic ties produce measurable changes in policy or bargaining behaviour. Economic pressure can also prompt diversification, resistance, or political backlash.

Militarily, modernization and increased expenditure strengthen China's ability to affect regional calculations and increase the potential credibility of deterrence. At the same time, military growth may

encourage other states to expand defense capabilities or deepen security cooperation. The findings therefore show that military power can generate both leverage and counterbalancing, and that force size or expenditure alone cannot establish political influence.

Institutionally, China's participation in established organizations and support for bodies such as the AIIB expand its opportunities to shape governance and provide additional forums for cooperation. However, participation and membership do not prove control or institutional transformation. The effect depends on governance rules, operational performance, member preferences, and whether China's priorities shape institutional decisions.

Technologically, China's growing capabilities and role in technology supply chains create opportunities to influence infrastructure, standards, and markets. Yet adoption may reflect practical considerations rather than political alignment. Security concerns, export controls, and efforts to diversify supply chains can constrain China's influence and contribute to the development of competing technological systems.

Normatively, China's advocacy of sovereignty, non-interference, development, and a more representative global system may resonate with states that share those concerns. However, advocacy is not equivalent to acceptance or implementation. Evidence of normative influence requires showing that other actors adopt the ideas in policy or institutional practice, not merely that they appear in official statements.

Territorial assertiveness can strengthen bargaining leverage or alter conditions in disputed areas, but it can also damage perceptions of legitimacy and encourage opposing coalitions. The findings indicate that territorial actions have consequences beyond the immediate dispute, affecting legal debates, regional security cooperation, and diplomatic relationships. Overall, the results suggest that China's influence is real but conditional: gains in one domain may be limited, contested, or offset by reactions in another.

Implications of the Study

The findings support a neoclassical realist approach by showing that material capabilities matter, but do not automatically determine foreign-policy outcomes. China's resources create opportunities and constraints, while leaders' interpretations, domestic priorities, institutional capacity, and other states' responses shape how those resources translate into influence. The results also caution against assuming that rising power necessarily produces either conflict or replacement of the existing order.

For policymakers, the central implication is that responses to China should be based on evidence of specific effects rather than broad assumptions about inevitable dominance or inevitable failure. Policies that strengthen domestic resilience, improve institutional legitimacy, maintain credible security arrangements, and provide partners with meaningful choices are more likely to address vulnerabilities without unnecessarily escalating competition. The findings also imply that cooperation and strategic competition can coexist across different issue areas.

The study highlights the importance of separating inputs, instruments, and outcomes. Economic size, military expenditure, diplomatic activity, and institutional membership are inputs or indicators of capacity, loans, negotiations, deployments, and standards proposals are instruments, changes in behaviour or rules are potential outcomes. Future research should use longitudinal and comparative evidence to establish whether a particular action caused a change, and should account for alternative explanations and counter-responses.

The findings imply that global influence is relational: it depends not only on what China does, but also on the choices of partner states and the credibility and performance of competing institutions and powers. Countries retain agency and may cooperate with China in some areas while resisting or hedging in others. For international institutions, this means that legitimacy, effective delivery, and fair representation are important to maintaining cooperation. For states and organizations, the challenge is to manage competition while preserving channels for collaboration on shared problems.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that China's geopolitical ambitions are contributing to changes in the distribution of global influence, but the evidence does not support treating that change as a simple or uniform transfer of power from existing actors to China. China's economic scale, military modernization, diplomatic activity, institutional engagement, technological development, normative advocacy, and territorial policies provide it with a wider range of instruments for shaping international outcomes. Whether those instruments produce influence depends on how they are used and how other governments, institutions, firms, and societies respond. The results show that capability, activity, and influence are distinct. A large economy, extensive diplomatic network, growing military, or new institution may create opportunities, but influence is demonstrated only when there is evidence of changed decisions, rules, alignments, or behaviour. China's influence varies by issue and partner, and it may be cooperative in one setting, coercive or contested in another. Its actions can also generate countermeasures, including economic diversification, military balancing, technological restrictions, and diplomatic opposition. The study therefore characterizes China's relationship with global order as both participatory and revisionary. China operates within many existing institutions while also seeking greater representation, promoting alternative priorities, and supporting additional institutions and networks. The findings do not establish that China has replaced the existing order or achieved comprehensive control over it. Rather, they suggest that China is seeking to reshape aspects of global governance and expand its influence within and beyond established arrangements, with outcomes that remain contested and contingent. Governments should assess influence through outcomes, not headline indicators. National foreign ministries, intelligence and strategic-analysis units, and parliamentary research services should distinguish resources and activities from demonstrated effects. Their assessments should track changes in partner behaviour, negotiated texts, institutional decisions, security alignments, and policy concessions. This would reduce the risk of interpreting diplomatic visits, trade volumes, military expenditure, or institutional membership as proof of influence. Foreign ministries should use issue-specific diplomatic strategies. Because support for China or any other power is not necessarily exclusive, diplomatic services should examine the interests behind partner positions and avoid assuming that a state's engagement with China signals a permanent alignment. They should invest in sustained consultation, coalition-building, and credible cooperation, while monitoring how support changes across issues and over time. Economic ministries and development-finance institutions should strengthen transparent, sustainable alternatives to economic dependence. Governments, regional development banks, and multilateral lenders should expand access to quality infrastructure finance and publish clear information on project costs, procurement, debt terms, and expected benefits. The goal should be to widen recipient countries' choices—not to penalize them for engaging with China. This can reduce vulnerability to coercive pressure while preserving mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Defense ministries and regional security organizations should pair deterrence with risk reduction. They should assess military developments using reliable, comparable evidence and strengthen communication channels, crisis hotlines, incident-prevention arrangements, and military-to-military dialogue. Security planning should address credible risks without treating every increase in capability as proof of hostile intent. This approach may reduce miscalculation while enabling states to protect their interests. International organizations and their member states should improve institutional transparency and representation. Governing bodies should review whether voting, leadership, financing, and agenda-setting arrangements fairly reflect members' contributions and interests. They should also assess new institutions on their governance, lending practices, standards, and performance rather than assuming that their creation either threatens or strengthens the existing order. These measures can improve institutional legitimacy and make cooperation more resilient. Technology ministries, regulators, and standards bodies should coordinate on open, secure, and interoperable systems. Governments should assess technology relationships for security, privacy, resilience, cost, and substitutability, and explain restrictions through clear evidence and consistent rules. Standards organizations should encourage broad participation and transparent procedures so that technical standards are not determined solely by geopolitical rivalry. Supply-chain diversification should be targeted at

genuine vulnerabilities and avoid unnecessary fragmentation. Diplomats and international organizations should evaluate normative claims through practice as well as language. Researchers, human-rights bodies, and multilateral institutions should compare states' public principles with their conduct and examine how proposed norms are interpreted and implemented. This can help distinguish genuine normative change from rhetorical agreement and support more consistent debate about sovereignty, development, rights, and international responsibility. Parties to territorial disputes should prioritize peaceful dispute management and legal clarity. Governments involved in contested areas, regional organizations, and relevant international bodies should maintain communication, avoid escalatory actions, and use available legal and diplomatic mechanisms. They should document incidents transparently and support practical confidence-building measures. These steps can reduce the risk that local disputes trigger wider confrontation or undermine regional cooperation. Universities and research organizations should improve the evidence base for assessing China's global influence. Researchers should use transparent definitions, comparable indicators, and case studies that include both successful and unsuccessful efforts to shape outcomes. They should distinguish official claims from independently verifiable evidence and examine alternative explanations such as shared interests, domestic politics, and responses to other powers. This would make future assessments more rigorous and less vulnerable to either alarmism or uncritical acceptance of official narratives.

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