



COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY

# CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

DAYA KISHAN THUSSU

ROUTLEDGE



# CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

*Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication* examines the rapidly evolving dynamics between global communication and geopolitics.

As an intersection between communication and international relations, it bridges the existing gap in scholarship and highlights the growing importance of digital communication in legitimizing and promoting the geopolitical and economic goals of leading powers. One central theme that emerges in the book is the continuity of asymmetries in power relations that can be traced back to 19th-century European imperialism, manifested in its various incarnations from ‘liberal’ to ‘neo-liberal’, to ‘digital’ imperialism. The book includes a discussion of the post–Cold War US-led transformation of the hardware and software of global communication and how it has been challenged by the ‘rise of the rest’, especially China. Other key issues covered include the geopolitics of image wars, weaponization of information and the visibility of discourses emanating from outside the Euro-Atlantic zone.

The ideas and arguments advanced here privilege a reading of geopolitical processes and examples from the perspective of the global South. Written by a leading scholar of global communication, this comprehensive and transdisciplinary study adopts a holistic approach and will be of interest to the global community of scholars, researchers and commentators in communication and international relations, among other fields.

**Daya Kishan Thussu** is Professor of International Communication at the Hong Kong Baptist University and President of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). Author or editor of 20 books, he was Inaugural Disney Chair in Global Media at Schwarzman College, Tsinghua University, Beijing. Prior to that, for many years he was Professor of International Communication at the University of Westminster in London. A PhD in international relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, he has been since 2005 the managing editor of the journal *Global Media and Communication*.

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# CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

*Daya Kishan Thussu*

First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-28079-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-28080-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-27169-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781315271699

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group  
<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# INTRODUCTION

## Geopolitics and global communication

The genesis of this book coincided with fundamental changes in global geopolitics. Its aim – a pioneering effort to connect global geopolitics with global communication – was to examine how the ‘rise of the rest’, especially China, was changing the global order, at a time when the US-led West was in decline and its globalization project on different levels was unravelling. During the course of writing the book, a succession of new and unforeseen developments rapidly reshaped the global geopolitical terrain and its mediatization: from the US-China trade war to a global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its aftermath, in parallel with turbo-charged technological advances, such as artificial intelligence (AI). Processing this vast amount of information and trying to analyse its multiple and multi-layered geopolitical implications was a daunting intellectual enterprise.

Having spent a quarter of a century researching and writing about international communication in London, arguably the best place to study such a field, I was fortunate to be offered, in 2018, the Disney Chair in Global Media at Schwarzman College in Tsinghua University in Beijing. During that academic year, I taught a course with the same title as this book to a small group of Schwarzman Scholars, who joined this prestigious college after a rigorous and highly competitive selection process to prepare them for ‘global leadership’. The interactions with such a highly skilled and talented group of young minds provided fresh ideas and perspectives for the book. It is rare for academics to experience geopolitics as it unfolds and to have the opportunity to record and to reflect on the import of such events. This is precisely what happened as I started a new job at a university in Hong Kong in August 2019, at the height of the anti-Beijing unrest. I realized that this protest movement had much wider geopolitical implications: in effect, the beginning of what came to be known as a ‘new’ Cold War, between the United States and China.

## Hong Kong: 'Asia's World City' caught in a global geopolitical game

The massive protests in summer 2019 against a proposed extradition bill that would allow criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be tried on the mainland received blanket coverage in the mainstream Western media, almost coinciding with the advent of the US-China trade war. With hundreds of thousands of mostly young protesters paralysing normal life from June 2019 to the end of the year, the Hong Kong story was headline news internationally. Fortunately, despite regular and consistent reporting of police atrocities in the Western media, though many were injured in the regular and often violent confrontations, only one protester lost his life (that too in an accident) in those six months. In contrast, during the same period, anti-government protests in other parts of the world – in Chile, France and most tragically in Iraq – received scant international coverage, including the fact that in October 2019, more than 100 protesters were killed in anti-regime protests in Baghdad.

Such double standards in reporting clearly demonstrate the geopolitical priorities of the dominant global media outlets. The protests in Hong Kong provided a perfect opportunity to point out the repressive policies of China in terms of ruthlessly crushing dissent and asserting its control over the Special Administrative Region. For their part, the overwhelmingly young protestors cleverly used their digital tactics to amplify a local protest into a global media event. Skilfully avoiding a digital footprint, they used anonymous and encrypted social networking platforms such as Telegram, as well as ubiquitous live streams (Hui, 2019) and projected the protests as spontaneous, even leaderless, aware that the authorities had prosecuted and imprisoned the leaders of the 79 days of protests in 2014, known as the Umbrella Movement (Lee and Chan, 2018; Dapiran, 2022).

Nevertheless, 'media faces' such as Joshua Wong were given extensive coverage in the Western media: he later wrote a book about his experiences which received considerable traction in US–UK media (Wong and Ng, 2020). Another leader, Nathan Law – the youngest Legislative Councillor, now in exile in London – also received extensive media coverage. In 2018, Nathan, Wong and another student leader Alex Chow were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by US congressmen and British parliament members. In 2020, Law was an invited speaker at the Oslo Freedom Forum, described by the *Economist* as the 'Davos for human rights,' and *Time* magazine included his name in the 100 most influential people in the world. His book, written with journalist Evan Fowler (Law, 2021), was reviewed extensively, and he even spoke at the 'Summit for Democracy' hosted by the Biden administration, the only speaker from Hong Kong.

The protesters were able to 'appeal to the global media directly (not least of all in English)' and conscious that they were 'the "chosen," free people of China whose messages about tyranny and "communist colonization" will be well received' (Vukovich, 2020: 202). Images of British and American flags being waved in many demonstrations, as well as of the protesting leaders with US consulate officials,

were distributed widely by the Chinese government propaganda machine, suggesting in hardly subtle terms that the protesters were being manipulated by ‘foreign forces’, demonstrating the wider geopolitical dimensions to the protests. In November of that year, US President Donald Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, further escalating the tension. The coverage of the protests in the Chinese official media was declared by Britain’s broadcasting regulator Ofcom in breach of the broadcasting code, citing five programmes broadcast on the China Global Television Network (CGTN) between 11 August 2019 and 21 November 2019. CGTN’s licence was revoked so that it is no longer available in the United Kingdom.

Media freedom in Hong Kong was under threat even before the protests: in 2016, for example, a senior editor of *Ming Pao Daily News* was dismissed after the newspaper took part in the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists’ publication of the Panama Papers leaks, which exposed the offshore wealth of some of China’s elites, a very Chinese version of ‘media capture’ (Frisch et al., 2018). The arrests of journalists, notably Jimmy Lai, the founder and owner of the pro-Western *Apple Daily*, Hong Kong’s most popular newspaper, in operation since 1995, reinforced the Western discourse about growing authoritarianism in what was considered an oasis of freedom and democracy. In December 2021, staff at *Stand News*, one of the few remaining independent voices, were arrested on suspicion of ‘conspiracy to print or distribute seditious materials’, forcing the pro-democracy online outlet to cease publication. In 2021, the Hong Kong broadcaster TVB did not broadcast the Academy Awards for the first time in more than half a century of this annual gala event, ostensibly because a documentary on the protests ‘Do Not Split’ had been nominated for an Oscar in the ‘documentary short’ category (Zeitchik, 2021). Accounts from veteran British (Vines, 2021) and Australian (Clifford, 2022) journalists with long associations with Hong Kong media, as well as academic work (Luqiu, 2021; Hung, 2022, among others), attest to this trend.

It is worth recalling that, as a British colony and a major hub for Western media organizations, Hong Kong was and remains a significant territory geopolitically, apart from its position as a financial centre. During the Cold War years, it was a nodal point for Western news organizations covering the region: US weekly news-magazines such as *Asiaweek* and *Far Eastern Economic Review* were based in the territory, as were, for a period, clandestine US propaganda networks like Radio Free Asia. While the Western and more specifically the British media extolled the virtues of their rule in the territory, the grim reality was that structural discrimination was rife, as elsewhere in British empire, in terms of how the ‘natives’ were barred from certain premises and public facilities and how they were treated in judicial proceedings. It was only in 1989 that a Chinese person was appointed as the commissioner of police, while the post of attorney general was held by a Briton until 1997. The question of censorship, too, is revealing; as a recent study has

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shown, the media were ‘pervasively’ censored during much of the colonial period (Ng, 2022).

While Hong Kong’s economic and financial systems remain distinct, in the Beijing-installed new government of Hong Kong, only ‘patriots’ can serve in positions of authority. Politically, the space for civil society has contracted and media freedoms have been curtailed. A US government report provided examples ‘of doxing and malicious cyber activities’, to ‘intimidate Hongkongers and silence pro-democracy speech online’, adding that the state broadcaster RTHK has been tamed too and the Hong Kong authorities have threatened foreign media outlets with legal consequences over the content of their editorials (Department of State, 2023). An editorial in *China Daily* rebutted these arguments, suggesting that by admitting that the measures were ‘directly threatening US interests in Hong Kong’, the US State Department revealed the true nature of its complaint: ‘What China has done is to remove the US tumours that had been growing in Hong Kong and strengthened its institutional resistance to any reappearance’ (*China Daily*, 2023a).

What the West failed to understand was why a large section of the Hong Kong elite might be keen to be aligned with Beijing for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. One commentator has labelled the Hong Kong elite as ‘*kuashang*’ (straddling businessmen), whose strategies reflect ‘a pragmatic style of thinking in which private-sector Hong Kong elites continuously read the shifting international terrain of power’ (Hamilton, 2021: 12). They also recognized that their future lay with Beijing and not with the West, despite verbal and material support from Washington, Brussels and London. One researcher claimed that the ‘Hong Kong issue’ heralded the arrival of the geopolitical ‘new cold war’, as it led to US-imposed sanctions on China (Toru, 2020: 95).

#### **Trumpism and the erosion of US global influence**

The election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States in 2016 – a business tycoon and a rank outsider to the public life, whose sole claim to fame was hosting for years a popular NBC reality television show *The Apprentice* – eroded the status of arguably the most important public office in the world. Apart from the controversy associated with his campaign and election, including alleged support from Russia and business interests in many other countries, Trump’s attitude towards mainstream media in the United States was indicative of the changing relationship between discourse creators (the political elite) and its distributors (the media). On several occasions, Trump accused the leading liberal media, including the CNN and the *New York Times*, of promoting ‘fake’ news, instead using social media platforms – notably Twitter (now X) to communicate. Making an intellectual case for Trump were conservative think tanks, such as the California-based Claremont Institute, whose quarterly journal *The Claremont Review of Books* published an ‘anti-anti-Trump’ essay in December 2016, arguing that ‘such a flawed contender could be a front-runner tells us more about what’s wrong with the country than about what’s wrong with his followers’ (quoted in Zerofsky, 2022).

Trump's assault on the integrity of news media at a time when the journalism industry in the United States and elsewhere is struggling to sustain itself was welcomed by a large number of news consumers, increasingly cynical towards the mainstream media and looking for myriad alternative voices available online (Carlson et al., 2021). This new media ecology encouraged the circulation of unedited, unsubstantiated content, with scant regard to facts, on digital networks and contributing to the new genre of 'fact-checking' (Walter et al., 2020).

For his political campaigning, Trump depended on such conservative cable networks as One America News Network (launched in 2013) and Newsmax, started on cable in 2014. Some scholars saw, in the political ascent of Trump, a deeper malaise afflicting American democracy (see essays in Tucker and Persily, 2020), while others viewed this as a sign of the 'degeneration' of the cultural and moral foundations of liberal societies, with growing inequalities and stagnation and the breakdown of social institutions, exacerbating political polarization (Calhoun et al., 2022).

As Biden took office in 2020, he wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that Trump had belittled, undermined, and in some cases abandoned U.S. allies and partners. He has turned on our own intelligence professionals, diplomats, and troops. . . . Most profoundly, he has turned away from the democratic values that give strength to our nation and unify us as a people.

(Biden, 2020)

Under the Trump presidency, the United States withdrew from such international bodies as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNESCO, as well as abandoned the Paris Climate Agreement.

Writing to mark the 30th issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, a journal associated with the National Endowment for Democracy, Francis Fukuyama noted two opposite trends – social fragmentation and the decline of the authority of mediating institutions, primarily in democracies, and the rise of new centralized hierarchies in authoritarian states (Fukuyama, 2020). Some have argued that the most dangerous form of threat to modern democracies is not the military coup but rather the steady, gradual erosion of norms and institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), while others were concerned about the alleged threat from 'sharp' powers (Walker, 2018) like Russia and China (Diamond, 2019), subverting the liberal democratic foundations of global geopolitics.

### **The imperial origins of the concept of geopolitics**

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of geography (human and physical) and economics on international politics/relations, with a focus on the relationship between the physical environment (territory, locations, resources and so forth) and the conduct of foreign policy. 'The study of geopolitics', it has been suggested, 'is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic

states' (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 192). Geopolitics should 'be viewed as the effects of space, topography, position and climate on political behaviour' (Starr and Siverson, 1990: 235). Critical readings of geopolitics suggest that it is an imperfect expression, as it

names not a singularity but a multiplicity, an ensemble of heterogeneous intellectual efforts to think through the geographical dimensions and implications of the transformative effects of changing technologies of transportation, communications, and warfare on the accumulation and exercise of power in the new world order of 'closed space'.

(Ó Tuathail, 1996: 12)

The so-called geopolitical tradition can be attributed to the work of Western intellectuals who helped to 'codify a mode of reasoning about international affairs' that would, in the context of the World War II, 'come to be organized and categorized as constituting a geopolitical tradition' (Ó Tuathail, 1996: 16). Coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén at the turn of the last century, the term *Geopolitik* became popular in Europe after World War I and gained global currency after World War II, primarily as an analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships. Kjellén's influence was particularly strong in Germany, where *Geopolitik* took on an ideological meaning during the Nazi regime. Karl Haushofer, a German army officer, widely recognized as the 'father of geopolitics', was a political geographer and leading proponent of geopolitics, who, in 1924, founded and was the editor of *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik (Journal for Geopolitics)*, as well as the director of the Institute of Geopolitics at the University of Munich. As a recent biography notes, Haushofer's theories of *Autarky* and *Lebensraum* were a crucial influence on the Nazi regime with the rationale for Germany's control of Europe and the world. He and his colleagues propagated the theory of the 'pan-region', encompassing an industrial centre and a periphery, and suggested that four regions – pan-Europe dominated by Germany, pan-Asia by Japan, pan-America by the United States, and pan-Russia by the Soviet Union – were likely to emerge as an intermediate stage before global German dominance. As Herwig has counselled, the 'demon' of *Geopolitik* demands closer scrutiny in this new age of geopolitics (Herwig, 2016).

Britain, too, saw geopolitics as an imperial project: the industrial capabilities of transportation, communication (railroads, steamships, airplanes and telegraphy) interacting with the geographical features of the earth, would shape the emerging global international system. Alfred Mahan argued that the control of sea routes was central to the rise of the British Empire, while his compatriot political geographer Halford Mackinder suggested that land power would trump sea power, arguing that the interior regions of Eurasia ('the heartland') had become the strategic centre of the 'World Island,' as a result of the relative decline of sea power. Mackinder's 'heartland' theory suggested that any state that was able to

control the heartland would control a worldwide empire. Mackinder is the source of many of the ideas of geopolitics that have been repeatedly rediscovered and reinvented to comprehend the ideology and practices of the US Empire (Kearns, 2009). The popularity of geopolitical theory declined after World War II, partly because of its association with Nazi Germany and mostly because of the emergence of nuclear warfare, reducing the significance of geographical factors in the global strategic balance of power. However, geopolitics continued to influence international politics, serving as the basis for the United States' Cold War policy of containment as a geopolitical strategy to limit the expansion of the Soviet communism.

In the Soviet Union, the victory over Germany was presented by party propagandists as a victory for all humanity, in contrast with the Western powers who fought it for their own geopolitical interests and to save their imperial possessions. The third edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, published during the regime of Leonid Brezhnev, defined 'geopolitics' as a 'bourgeois, reactionary conception' based on the idea of the nation-state as a geographic and biological organism seeking to expand, the opposite of the ideology of borderless international socialism, and noted that geopolitics 'became the official doctrine of Fascism' (quoted in Petrov, 2018: 20). Commentators retrospectively defend expansionist policies of the Soviet Union, for example the forced 'Sovietization of neighbouring countries' with reference to geopolitics. Russian political analyst Alexander Dugin is credited with helping revive the concept of *Novorossiya* or 'New Russia' – the term invoked in the 18th century for lands the Russian empire had captured from the Ottomans as a nationalist driver for Russian ambitions. He is also the lead propagator of the idea of *Russky Mir* or 'Russian world' anchored in both imperial nostalgia and Orthodox Christian identity. In his 1997 best-selling book, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin argued that Russia as a civilization-state should be at the heart of a 'Eurasian empire', stretching from Vladivostok to Europe to challenge the maritime power of the US 'liberal empire'.

### Critical geopolitics

Much of traditional geopolitical theorizing emerged in Europe during the age of empire (Agnew, 2003). Geopolitical thought – a view of the world that can be captured from one (European) viewpoint – emerged as a part of European exploration and colonialism and later evolved into legitimizing the balance-of-power politics of the 19th and 20th centuries (Ó Tuathail, 1996).

Such Eurocentric expositions of geopolitics have led to accounts of world history that leave out most of the world (Slater, 2004). More recently, a more global world history is being reclaimed. One historian has shown how the sea routes of Asia transformed a vast expanse of the globe during the past 500 years, powerfully shaping the modern world. The volume of traffic across Asian sea routes – an area stretching from East Africa and the Middle East to Japan – grew dramatically,

eventually making them the busiest in the world. The result was a massive circulation of people, commodities, religion, culture, technology and ideas (Tagliacozzo, 2022).

As one Indian commentator noted:

The classical geopoliticians were children of their age and looked at Asian geopolitics through a late nineteenth-century European or British lens, concentrating on the European hegemony that followed the breakup or decline of the classical Asian empires, namely, the Mughals in India, the Ming and early Qing in China, the Ottomans in Türkiye, and the Safavids in Iran.

(Menon, 2021: 20)

The Indian subcontinent was ‘both the pivot of the Indian Ocean world and also a self-contained geopolitical unit and could choose its engagement with the rest of the world’ (ibid.: 13). The first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, in his book, *The Discovery of India*, saw geopolitics and power politics as the handmaidens of fascism, national socialism and imperialism. For him, geopolitics was ‘the anchor of the realist’, and ‘its jargon of ‘heartland’ and ‘rimland’ was a ‘partial truth [which] is sometimes more dangerous than a falsehood’. He argued that ‘the old policy of expansion and empire and the balance of power ... inevitably leads to conflict and war’ (cited in ibid.: 29).

In more recent years, the trend towards critical geopolitics has challenged the notions of space and spatiality, arguing that it is not confined to territoriality but includes popular geopolitics (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992: 190). This strand of analysis approaches geopolitics not as a neutral consideration of pre-given ‘geographical’ facts but as a deeply ideological and politicized form of analysis. Critical geopolitics seeks to unpack the rigid territorial assumptions of traditional geopolitical thinking. Post-Cold War geopolitics reveals the continued reliance on binary understandings of power and spatiality, on notions of East and West, security and danger, freedom and oppression, for example how the ‘war on terror’ works with these same binaries (see essays in Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). Beyond nation-states, geopolitics operates also at a supranational level: positive claims about European integration overcoming nationalist narratives of territory and identity are premised on deep assumptions about Europe as a privileged territorial and cultural unit, while the European Union (EU) considers itself as a geopolitical entity. Much of critical geopolitics focuses empirically on the core states of the West, especially the United States. This is not surprising given that US foreign policy, scholarship and popular culture have been hegemonic in the exercise of geopolitics.

Outside the elite realms of state power, there are other agents of geopolitics: popular media, cartoons, films and social activists (Power and Crampton, 2005). The representations of popular geopolitics in relation to the ‘war on terror’ (Dodds and Ingram, 2009) constitute what has been variously described as the ‘Military Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network’ (Der Derian, 2009), ‘militainment’ (Stahl, 2010) and the ‘Military-Entertainment Complex’ (Lenoir and

Caldwell, 2018). Also significant is the ‘feminist geopolitics’, which engages with actors and locations outside the formal sphere of the state, emphasising the ‘personal is also geopolitical’ (Dixon, 2015). Others have proposed a framework of ‘meta-geopolitics’, adding new dimensions of geopolitics to offer a multidimensional view of power – soft and hard power – and its exercise in maintaining or enhancing international relations (Al-Rodhan, 2009).

Another important shift is the increasing role of digital diasporas in a ‘new wave of human geopolitics’ (Gamlen, 2019: 7), increasingly connected on the internet which enables geographically dispersed members to connect with one another and negotiate their identity (Brinkerhoff, 2009). The ‘domestic abroad’ has a crucial role in international relations (Varadarajan, 2010), indicated by the growing profile of the Indian-American diaspora – the second-largest immigrant group in the United States. From CEOs of major global corporations to highly educated professionals and even White House power brokers, their ascent reflects their economic, political and social influence, which the successive Indian governments have tried to encash as a soft power resource (Thussu, 2013a; Chakravorty et al., 2017; Badrinathan et al., 2021).

The Chinese government and the communist party engage actively with their diaspora, especially the influential Chinese communities in the United States and in Britain (Liu, 2022). China has consistently deployed – though not always successfully – ‘diaspora statecraft’ to promote the country’s geopolitical and strategic interests (Wong, 2022). For the Russian government, Russians or Russophones living abroad are conceptualized as *sootchestvenniki* (compatriots), and the Russian language is considered one of the most salient markers of their identity rather than ethnicity or nationality (Cheshkin and Kachuyevski, 2018). Geopolitically *Russkiy Mir* was conceived as a Russian ‘diaspora empire’, with particular importance continually placed on the ‘Russian enclaves’ in its ‘near abroad’.

## How global geopolitics is changing

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, the US-shaped world order is changing: there is a perceptible decline in US power and a corresponding rise in the influence of large non-Western nations, primarily China. Some see this seismic shift indicative of the fall of the neoliberal order (Gerstle, 2022). Others have raised doubts about the phenomenon of globalization itself for its failure to live up to its much-hyped potential to create a globally interdependent society, witnessed in the rise of right-wing populism and religious fundamentalism (Hafez and Grüne, 2022). As historian Paul Kennedy has surmised in the epilogue of his sweeping history, a 500-year survey of rise and fall of great powers:

so far as the international system is concerned, wealth and power or economic strength and military strength are relative . . . and since all societies are subject to the inexorable tendency to change, then international balances can *never* be still, and it is a folly of statesmanship to assume that they ever would be.

(Kennedy, 1988: 536, italics in original)

Others have suggested that in contrast to Western notions of liberal universalism, China and Russia define themselves as civilizational states, with unique cultural values and political institutions as a form of cultural exceptionalism (Copeland, 2022). This is already having ‘a profound impact upon the physical realm of international relations and the informational representations of it’ (Chifu and Simons, 2023: 5). A Bloomberg analysis declared the end of ‘great age of globalization’ as China and Russia joined hands (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2022), while a US think tank report argued that the speeches and writings of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasize the superiority of autocratic systems and the failings of democracy (Kroenig, 2020). Some even detect vestiges of an imperial revivalism among former Eurasian empires such as China and Russia, exploiting new opportunities engendered by a polycentric world to project power within and beyond their borders in patterns shaped by their respective imperial pasts (Mankoff, 2022). This recalling of an imperial legacy is also relevant to the ‘liberal’ West: British colonialism was, above all, the business of corporations, what a recent study has described as ‘venture colonialism’, which has survived the end of empire (Stern, 2023). The emergence of China and Russia has ended the period of unipolarity and ushered in an era of multipolarity, which is more reminiscent of those earlier eras (Mearsheimer, 2018).

### Calibrating the China challenge

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, triggering the so-called new Cold War (Li and Fang, 2022), resembles the inter-imperial rivalry among the great powers at the turn of the 20th century (Hung, 2022). Hung argues that this was provoked by the global expansion of China’s state-backed corporations, coupled with the export of industrial overcapacity. Both the United States and China are seeking to establish positions of centrality in the networks of trade, production and consumption, through which power will be projected (Schindler and DiCarlo, 2023).

The 2018 National Security Strategy of the United States defined the long-term, strategic competition with China as the central challenge to US prosperity and security (Wang and Tanner, 2021) and indicated that China was a significant threat to the ‘liberal international order’ (Ogden, 2022). The CIA director William Burns announced a new mission centre focused on China, which he called ‘the most important geopolitical threat we face in the 21st century’ (Harris, 2021). It was argued by security hawks in the United States that ‘decoupling with China – first in trade and then in technology and finance – would reduce China’s economic growth potential significantly, and thus contain its power’ (Pei, 2019: 1). China is already the world’s second-largest economy: in 2023, for the fifth consecutive year, China topped the *Fortune Global 500* list in terms of the number of companies – 142 (including Hong Kong), followed by the United States at 136 (Fortune, 2024).

China's global ambitions are best represented by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is the central plank of its strategy 'to implement the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative' and build 'a global community of shared future' (Government of China, 2023). Scholars 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).

### ***BRI at 10: the geopolitics of the world's largest infrastructure project***

Coined in the 19th century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, the phrase 'the silk roads' (*die Seidenstrassen*) has been revived by China in recent decades as the BRI (Frankopan, 2018). Marking the tenth anniversary of setting up the BRI, it is officially defined 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)*

Launched in 2013 by President Xi as 'One Belt One Road', this has morphed into the largest and the most influential infrastructural and investment initiative in modern history (Schneider, 2021; Ahmed and Lambert, 2022). By 2023, as many as 152 countries as well as 32 international organizations were involved in the BRI, generating trade and investment in the past decade in the range of more than two trillion dollars (although Italy was the only G-7 country to join BRI, it announced its withdrawal as the 'de-risking' discourse became dominant in the West). The geopolitical significance of such a massive and global infrastructural project can be gauged by comparing it with the post-Second World War Marshall Plan, undertaken by the United States between 1948 and 1951 with \$13.3 billion to rebuild war-torn Western Europe. Seventy years later, the United States is very much still present in Europe – militarily, politically and culturally – and arguably shaping its foreign policy. The BRI has a much wider geographical range, ambition and investment, and it will hardly be surprising if it leaves an indelible Chinese mark on large parts of the globe (Frankopan, 2018; Mações, 2018; Freymann, 2020; Carney, 2023).

Apart from constructing heavy infrastructure – roads, ports and airports – the BRI is increasingly focusing on 'digital silk roads', with ambition to dominate the physical infrastructure underlying global digital communications and a potential advantage in internationalizing its formidable tech sector (Freymann, 2020). In this expansion, China's digital corporations such as Tencent (Tang, 2019; Chen,

2023) and Alibaba (Wong, 2022) have played a crucial role. Researchers from a Berlin-based think tank Mercator Institute for China Studies note 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 and Ohlberg, 2019: 46).

The BRI forms part of China’s concerted efforts to focus on the global South (Tudoroiu and Kuteleva, 2022). India opposes the BRI due to the fact that parts of its flagship programme, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, cross the disputed border between the two Asian giants. China is now the largest aid giver to the developing world (Dreher et al., 2022), giving it unprecedented power to influence geopolitics in the global South including challenging the existing rules of the liberal international system (Murphy, 2022).

In 2021, the US magazine *Politico* published a 5,000-word article attributed to Anonymous, a ‘former senior government official with deep expertise and experience dealing with China’, which suggested that one of China’s key priorities was to transform the BRI ‘into a geopolitical bloc as an infrastructural foundation for a Sino-centric global order’ (Anonymous, 2021). In the same year, 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 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 and Christensen, 2019: 5).

The view of China as the main source of challenges to the global system was heightened during another world-changing event, the global pandemic of Covid-19, which emerged in China in late 2019 and spread across the globe. It has been argued that this altered the global order, slowing processes of globalization and even promoting de-globalization: ‘The pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people’ (Kissinger, 2020). It was also framed as another example of the geopolitical contest between the United States and China (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021; Kahl and Wright, 2021), and textbooks on geopolitics now take on board the geopolitical implications of the global pandemic (Flint, 2022).

### ***The geopolitics of a global pandemic***

From the outset, China’s image was damaged by its reluctance to share information about the most serious health emergency in a century (Cosentino, 2023). Although the first documented location of community spread was the wet market in Wuhan on 17 November 2019, it was not until 31 December that the Chinese government formally notified the WHO of this outbreak. The authorities sought to control the Covid-19 narrative to defend the Party’s actions. Dr. Li Wenliang, who on

December 30 informed colleagues that he had treated several cases resembling SARS, was publicly reprimanded and forced to sign an apology for ‘disturbing the social order’. Li subsequently contracted Covid-19 and died, becoming a folk hero on Chinese social media (BBC, 2020a). A *Washington Post* editorial cast doubts about ‘China’s ability to mount an effective response to a transnational crisis emanating from within its borders’ and questioned what ‘key leaders knew, and when they knew it’ (*Washington Post*, 2020). Trump repeatedly accused Beijing of not maintaining an open, transparent and responsible approach to the pandemic, publicly referring to the virus as the ‘Chinese virus’ or ‘Wuhan virus’, and demanding compensation from China for the economic costs of the pandemic (White House, 2020).

For their part, the Chinese media highlighted how the Chinese lockdown model was superior to the more laissez-faire approach of the West, which was slow to respond and where many more people succumbed to the pandemic than in China. It used the pandemic to demonstrate leadership in global health, deploying ‘mask diplomacy’ (distributing face masks and other personal protective equipment [PPE]), followed by ‘vaccine diplomacy’ (sending Chinese-made vaccines, especially to the global South). ‘Such attempts to project soft power and expand international influence (and garner goodwill) were accompanied by aggressive tactics to shape the global health agenda in China’s favour’ (Huang, 2022: 2). Despite this, China received a negative coverage in the Western media, with the suggestion that it was manipulating the functioning of the WHO.

The geopolitics of the vaccine economy was evident from the fact that Western pharmaceutical companies did not allow India and South Africa to develop generic vaccines (Desai, 2023), rejecting their appeal to the World Trade Organization (WTO) to provide a waiver to ‘intellectual property related to Covid-19 drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and other technologies for the duration of the pandemic, until global herd immunity is achieved’ (WTO, 2020). Subtle and not-so-subtle pressures – directly and indirectly – were exerted on the countries in the global South to use the vaccines developed by the United States, despite its exorbitant cost. The first country actually to develop its own vaccine against the virus was Russia – whose Sputnik was released in August 2020, but the WHO and other medical bodies discouraged its distribution globally, partly for commercial reasons. As the world emerged from the crisis of the pandemic, in February 2022, Ukraine was invaded by Russia, in clear violation of international law, which had major geopolitical reverberations.

### **The Russian invasion of Ukraine: geopolitical rifts and shifts**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has demonstrated the limits of Western powers to shape the global agenda, as large sections of the world saw it as a regional not a global crisis. It also exposed the extent to which the EU – without a coherent defence or foreign policy – was dependent on the United States. The

conflict witnessed the most stringent sanctions imposed by the West on any country, an act of ‘economic warfare’ with a long history, going back to the inter-war years, and which, a new study notes, created ‘the structure of the political and economic order that we inhabit today’ (Mulder, 2022: 3). In the past 80 years, the United States has deployed economic sanctions against the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran and Iraq as well as against South Africa’s apartheid system.

The United States and the EU blocked major Russian banks from using SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), the financial-communication system that facilitates the transfer of money around the world, a move which was described by the French finance minister as a ‘financial nuclear weapon’ (Leali, 2022). Despite dire predictions from Western experts that the Russian economy would collapse in three months, it not only survived but also experienced modest growth, while Europe’s biggest economy, Germany, was in recession. What the West did not take fully into account was how the forging of new geopolitical and economic ties outside the Euro-Atlantic zone, between Russia and other large economies, notably China and India, would undermine the sanctions regime.

The communications aspect of the event followed the usual Western narrative in media coverage: the invasion was led by an ‘irrational’ and ‘unwell’ leader of an authoritarian state, who threatened use of weapons of mass destruction – ‘nuclear war’ (Zajec, 2022). This was used to justify the enormous military aid given to Ukraine, the United States spending more than \$100 billion, while the EU pledged \$96 billion – a windfall for defence companies – supplying sophisticated weaponry, including the Patriot missile system. The *Washington Post* revealed in an exclusive report that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was working closely with Ukrainian intelligence service, the SBU, and its military counterpart, the GUR, having spent since 2015 ‘tens of millions of dollars’ to transform these services into potent allies against Moscow. Intercepted communications from Russian military and intelligence units, it reported, are relayed through the new CIA-built facility to Washington, where it is ‘scrutinized by CIA and NSA’ (Miller and Khurshudyan, 2023).

Any pretence of this being not a proxy war was dispelled by the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock when she claimed at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January 2023 that European nations were ‘fighting a war against Russia’ and must do more to defend Ukraine. She went on to comment at the Munich Security Conference that Russian President Vladimir Putin must ‘change by 360 degrees’ for Ukraine to be safe. Such unprofessionalism provoked much derision among commentators and not just in Moscow.

Some of these ideas stem from a stream of thought deeply rooted within Europe, which views Russia as ‘the Other’, and Russophobia fundamental to propaganda (Gleeson, 1950). The conflict in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ is projected by the West as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism and between European integration and Russian ‘imperialism’ (Diesen, 2022). One account, originally in French,

and translated into Russian, Italian and German, has argued that Russophobia was supplanted after 1917 by ‘Sovietophobia’ (Mettan, 2017), while another scholar argues that anti-Soviet/Russia sentiment in the United States – including Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire’ jibe – emanates from the myth that Russia is intrinsically anti-Western, illiberal and expansionist (Tsygankov, 2009: 14–15). Given such a history, the West’s role in contributing to the conflict in Ukraine is often ignored in mainstream Western media: its support for toppling President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 sparked a crisis in eastern Ukraine, while the Minsk-2 agreement, a year later, which offered a compromise, was undermined by the United States, followed by the EU.

That the Russian-dominated regions of Ukraine might have reasons to be apprehensive rarely forms part of the Western discourse. Under their ‘de-Russification’ programme, Ukrainians were ‘trying to erase Russia – and the Russian language – from their culture and landscape’. This effort to ‘decolonize’ Ukraine has its roots in the movement to ‘de-communize’ the country during the so-called Maidan Revolution of 2013–2014 (Mellen et al., 2023).

Despite intense diplomatic pressure from the United States and its Western allies, much of the global South did not isolate Russia diplomatically, especially at the United Nations (UN). India and the United Arab Emirates abstained from crucial votes, and 35 countries – representing almost 50 per cent of the world population – abstained or voted ‘no’ on resolution to condemn the Russian invasion on 2 March 2022. While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky received standing ovations wherever he spoke – in Western parliaments, film festivals and security conferences – when he addressed the African Union in June 2022, only four out of 55 invited heads of state attended the virtual session (BBC, 2022c).

### **The myth of the EU as an autonomous geopolitical actor**

When she assumed office, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, defined it as a ‘geopolitical Commission’, although the EU’s policy in the global arena is often seen outside the Euro-Atlantic space as following dictates from across the ocean. On Ukraine for example, the EU generally supported Washington’s agenda of legitimizing the eastward expansion of NATO at considerable social, political and economic cost to itself. When the French-supported regimes in the Sahel region were replaced by Moscow-friendly governments in 2022–2023, the EU was largely absent, as was the case when Azerbaijan took over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, expelling more than 100,000 Armenians from the enclave.

At the heart of the EU project is Germany, the powerhouse of the EU, which made itself strong in the post-Cold War period by pursuing three key policies: ensuring a regular supply of cheap gas from Russia; exporting its high-end industrial products to China, one of the world’s biggest markets, and importing raw materials for its booming industry from China, and lastly, unlike other Western

powers, having a small defence budget. In the past two years, all three policies have been reversed, with the result that Europe's biggest economy is in recession, while it is buying \$3 billion worth of high-tech weaponry from Israel – the biggest defence deal for that country. The muted response from the government to the September 2022 destruction of Nordstream 2 (Hersh, 2023) and the enthusiasm with which its 'green' foreign minister is buying liquefied natural gas from the United States, at three times the cost of the Russian gas, indicates the limitations of the EU project. In addition, the Ukraine invasion has contributed to over a million refugees in Germany, fuelling political tensions arising from anti-immigration feeling, benefitting far-right political parties.

Despite claims that the Ukraine crisis is unifying Europe, it has instead shown how the United States has weakened it, especially the 'old' Europe. Poland is being seen by the United States as the leader of what was described by the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2003 as the 'New Europe'. Poland has demanded \$1.3 trillion in reparations as compensation for German damages during World War II. The United States, which has its first permanent military installation in Poland in the city of Poznan, is supporting Poland's plans to double the size of its standing army, making it the largest in Europe. A senior US official told the *New York Times* that US thinking on security was shifting eastward: 'we are meshing together with the Poles in a way that is truly historic in this relationship' (quoted in Zerofsky, 2023).

Such realignment reflects what Jack Matlock, the last US ambassador to the Soviet Union, had argued, that 'the end of the Cold War 'diminished rather than enhanced American power': with the removal of the Soviet threat, allies were less willing to accept American protection and leadership (Matlock, 2011). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has re-established the US security umbrella, strengthened NATO and 'mercilessly exposed' the EU's lack of 'strategic autonomy', as two commentators wrote in a leading German magazine (Kurbjuweit and Neukirch, 2022). They added that Europe has 'long cowered beneath the protective umbrella of the United States, but that isn't a reliable long-term strategy' (ibid.). It could be argued that the re-establishment of US hegemony in Europe was provoked by Washington's need to challenge the EU's power to restrict its digital empires through their stringent regulations.

### **The 'Rise of the Rest'**

For the last half century, the United States has dominated the global geopolitical scene with its other group of seven partners – Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan. Founded in 1975, the G-7 embodies and sustains historical power relations from a different, colonial era: two were European empires (Britain and France); Germany, Italy and Japan were the losers in World War II, destroyed and rebuilt by the United States and then under the geopolitical influence of

Washington, while Canada, a former dominion of Britain, is now under tutelage of the United States. Soon after the end of the Cold War, Russia joined the G-7, making it the G-8, but it was a short-lived experience.

The claims by the G-7 that it represents the ‘most advanced industrial countries,’ cannot be sustained in 2023 when many other countries outside this elite grouping are bigger economies – notably China and, to a lesser extent, India. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), by 2027, the global South will account for 29 per cent of global GDP surpassing the G7, with China contributing more than 20 per cent. IMF says, in 2020, Britain made up 2.3 per cent of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms, while China represented nearly 19 per cent of global GDP, and it is growing in relative terms, while the United States was at 16 per cent but declining (IMF, 2023).

The main challenger to the G-7 in geopolitical terms is BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), in operation as a formal group since 2006 and holding annual summits since 2009. Originally a Russian project to gather the large non-Western nations together in a geopolitical forum, the BRICS was co-opted by China to demonstrate to the world at large that it was not the only economy that was ‘rising’ to allay Western fears. Despite predictions to the contrary among dominant Western scholarship and elite media, the BRICS grouping of nations is increasing in influence. As the G-7’s share of global GDP declines, the BRICS economies continue to grow. The share of BRICS in global GDP grew from 18 per cent in 2010 to 26 per cent in 2021, with China accounting for more than 70 per cent of BRICS GDP in 2021 (UNCTAD, 2023: 5). New members are queuing up: During the 2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg, six new countries were admitted to the group: Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Argentina (which later decided not to join) and Ethiopia. Indonesia and Türkiye want to join, too, among other aspirants. Its 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, 2023a). The expanded BRICS group will contain some of the world’s largest oil exporters, namely Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Arab Emirates and Iran, as well as some of its biggest importers, China and India (Daoud and Johnson, 2023).

A Bloomberg report notes that BRICS+ will overtake the G-7, noting that if it ‘succeeds in shifting some settlement of oil transactions toward other currencies, that could have a knock-on effect on the share of the dollar in international trade and global foreign exchange reserves’. BRICS members have also been keen to work towards de-dollarization to counter their dependence on the dollar and trade amongst themselves in local currencies, as indicated by an IMF paper (Arslanalp et al., 2022). For example, in 2021, China signed a \$400 billion deal involving Chinese investments in Iran over 25 years in exchange for the regular supply of oil. In 2022, BRICS accounted for 36 per cent of the global economy, against 30 per cent for the G-7, forecasting that by 2040, the share of BRICS+ will be 45 per cent compared with 21 per cent for the G-7.

BRICS represents a trend to multi-polarity in global power relations, having a major role in a post-unipolar and ‘post-Western’ global order, as Brazilian (Stuenkel, 2016 and 2018), Indian (Chaturvedi and Saha, 2021) and South African (Zondi, 2022) accounts suggest. The resulting redistribution of power has been described as a system of ‘unbalanced multipolarity’, diffusing away from the superpowers toward a variety of capable, dynamic middle powers that will help to shape the international environment in coming decades (Ashford and Cooper, 2023). Putin has suggested that a ‘multipolar system of international relations is now being formed. It is an irreversible process; it is happening before our eyes’ (TASS, 2022). Even French President Emmanuel Macron has advocated that Europe should ‘seek to be a third pole’ in an emerging world order (Foroudi and Rose, 2023).

India has been an active promoter of the notion of global multipolarity, although it has a particularly complicated position in this India is aiming to strike a delicate balance in promoting its geopolitical interests by strengthening its close security and economic ties with the United States and retaining traditional relations with Russia and trade connections with China in such multilateral forums as BRICS, of which India was a founding member, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which it joined in 2017.

‘The rise of the BRICS countries’, notes a think tank report from India, will put ‘significant pressure on the existing hegemony in multilateral institutions’. As these countries begin to play a proactive role in global governance, it observed, ‘their contributions can be amplified through parallel efforts at supporting the development needs of the Global South’ (Chaturvedi and Saha, 2021: 10). Along with its BRICS partners, India has been pushing for reform of the bodies of global governance, such as the WTO, and the expansion of permanent membership of the UN Security Council to reflect contemporary global realities.

India has revitalized its position as a leading voice of the global South, coinciding with a three-year stretch where the G-20 is being led by countries from the global South: Indonesia in 2022, India in 2023 and Brazil in 2024. India has hosted two Voice of the Global South Summits in January and November 2023, aimed at encouraging more effective and sustainable cooperation among the developing countries.

Arguments have been advanced that, in an interdependent world, all should come together to strengthen global multilateral institutions and, since Asians constitute 60 per cent of humanity, they should take leadership in what is described as ‘an Asian century’. They should restore the primary role of the UN General Assembly to serve as the global parliament; to strengthen key multilateral organizations, like the WHO by providing them with more resources; and to share with the world one of the best models of regional multilateral cooperation such as ASEAN (Mahbubani, 2022: 10–11).

## How global communication is changing

US-based corporations still control large swathes of the global communication infrastructure, owning satellites, telecommunication hubs and cyberspace (Boyd-Barrett, 2014). This hardware enables US-originated or inspired media software to traverse the global digital superhighways, giving the country and the corporations based on their formidable power to shape the media agenda in fields ranging from news (CNN, CNBC, *New York Times*) to documentary (Discovery), and from sport (ESPN) to entertainment (Hollywood), to the streaming universe (Netflix, Amazon Prime), increasingly on an online space colonized and commodified by a few digital conglomerates (Thussu, 2019). According to the International Intellectual Property Alliance, the core copyright industries in the US economy accounted for \$1.8 trillion in 2021, while the export of select US copyright products was more than \$230 billion (IIPA, 2022). This global presence is supported by well-resourced epistemic communities: specialized NGOs, think tanks, universities and media foundations, with their international partners and affiliates, which provide an intellectual infrastructure within which neo-liberal ideologies are communicated and legitimized.

However, this traditional domination of global communication by the West is being challenged as a result of the transformation of digital technology and globalization of communication systems. Powerful non-Western nations, notably China and Russia and their other BRICS partners, as well as Türkiye and Iran have developed their own communication infrastructure and media to promote their geopolitical interests (see contributions in Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015; Thussu and Nordenstreng, 2021).

One substantial change in the geopolitics of global communication has been the internationalization of media channels by powerful rivals to the US-dominated system, China (Cook, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2023) and Russia. The most powerful voice of Chinese state media, CGTN, has expanded in recent years to cover the globe, broadcasting, apart from English, in French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic (Varrall, 2020), with a special focus on Africa (Marsh, 2023), while programmes on such networks as the StarTimes, with operations in 30 African countries, promote China's image and worldviews (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, the English-language publications *China Daily* and more popularly the *Global Times*. With international editions including in the United States and in Europe, *China Daily* was circulated as a supplement with notable global newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, while its monthly supplement *China Watch* published supplements in English, French, German and Spanish with newspapers across the world including a Russian edition in partnership with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

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