

Tariffs and Tanks: China's Economic Concessions and Military Symbolism in a Multipolar Era

Mathew Alex

From the 2010 China began creating its own multilateral institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), this development of multilateral institutions shows that China has accelerated the strategic competition with USA led western order, as we know for a country both Hard Power and Soft Power are important therefore China also started to develop its influence in both strategies. In recent times, two developments from the side of China, which are the **China–Africa zero-tariff Policy** and the **2025 Victory Day parade with Putin and Kim**, show how they are integrating two methods to influence and inform the global power hierarchies. When we see these incidents, it may look like two separate incidents, but China's zero-tariff policy – TARIFFS and the military parade along with Putin and Kim – TANKS show how China is trying to become the Top Dog of the global order and to challenge the US hegemony. Through the economic interventions or the 'TARIFFS', they are trying to create a China-led economic infrastructure in the global south, by creating trade dependencies, diplomatic alignment, and their solidarity. At the same time, the military symbolism or the 'TANKS' they are signalling the global world, especially the Western bloc, about their new security bloc and its military capabilities.

By carefully analysing these two strategic tools, we can understand how China is creating a new narrative in international order. Tariffs help by expanding economic interdependence, while Tanks help to show their deterrence and alignment among the CRINK.

Tariffs: The Economic Anchor in the Global South

Zero-tariff policy towards the least developed countries in Africa is a key tool used by China to control the economic system in that region. China is introducing this tariff as a commitment to defending multilateralism and the collective interest of developing nations. Beijing presents this tariff as an alternative concession against Western economies' unilateral and disruptive measures. Chinese officials argue that protectionist methods in export and import are against the global economic

order; therefore, this zero-tariff policy towards the least developed countries will enhance South-South cooperation and safeguard the development of these underdeveloped nations.

China implemented this initiative in an extraordinary manner. As of December 2024, 100 percent zero-tariff treatment to all LDCs that have diplomatic ties to Beijing, around 33 African nations get this benefit. Later in June 2025, through the Changsha Declaration, these benefits were further expanded to 53 African countries maintaining diplomatic relations with China. Du Xiaohui, Director-General of the Department of African Affairs, said that this is the first time in modern international relations history that a 100 percent tariff-free policy on all products has been announced for this many nations. This act signals that China's strategic step is to gain control over global trade, especially in the Global South. The result of this policy has been sudden and quantifiable. China's Ministry of Commerce reports that by March 2025, imports from African countries reached 21.24 billion USD, which means a 15.2% year-on-year increase from the time of policy implementation. We can also see similar trends from the case study. Fisher Global is one of the key exporters of Rwandan dried chili, normally exporting 200-300 tons annually to China in recent years, but now it has increased to around 1,500 tons per year due to the demand increase following the tariff elimination. We can see not only the statistical data, but African leaders are emphasizing the structural transformation happening due to this policy. Ambassador to China, Tefera Derbew, commended that zero-tariff access will help African products with unique characteristics reach the vast Chinese market while simultaneously promoting industrialization across the continent. Senegal's Minister of Agriculture, Mabouba Diagne, argues that the policy is no longer merely about importing African goods but about "co-building industrialization"- from this, we can analyze that China is not merely economically helping them from Western countries but structurally changing their economy as per their interest.

More than this, the zero-tariff policy, China also provides "green channels" for African products. This provided an opportunity for participation in major platforms such as the China International Import Expo and the China International Supply Chain Expo. This will help the African market to interact with the global market and will also help with economic partnership agreements for long-term, stable institutional support. We can also see that China's Ministry of Commerce, under the China-Africa Economic Partnership for Shared Development, embodies the goals of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the vision of constructing an "all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future."

China frames this policy not just as a benevolent act but as a response to the Western powers' exploitative and self-prioritizing attitude against these least

developed countries. By doing this, all of China is trying to become itself as a whole that stands with the exploited. This will help China in getting loyalty, diplomatic alignment, long-term economic interdependence, and resource incentives. In reality, Beijing, through a zero-tariff policy, placed a structural anchor in these countries, which will help the Chinese-led economic order in the long run.

Tanks: Symbolic Signaling in the Strategic North

When a zero-tariff strategy focuses on the Global South, its military symbolism - notably the high-profile parade- stands as another important approach to reshaping the global power structure. One of the notable incidents is that the 80th Victory Day military parade in Beijing shows how China uses public military parade not just as an event, but as an instrument signaling the world, especially the Western world, about its strength and strategic alliances that are being formed without any official so-called alliance. They are trying to build a narrative of anti-imperial solidarity in which China is the key player in the emerging global order.

The important aspect of this parade is that the presence of Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, and leaders from Iran and Myanmar showcased a deliberate display of diplomatic and military solidarity against the Western-centric international order in the current scenario. This formation of partnership is not a formalized treaty, but it still serves as a powerful political symbol. The avoidance of an official summit or a formal alliance is a deliberate effort, which shows high visibility but at the same time maintains strategic deniability. By this, it creates a flexible alliance not that much focused on commitments, rules, and law, but also signaling cohesion.

The arms and weaponry are also a message. The display of advanced weapon systems, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and hypersonic technologies by China is intended to demonstrate its military strength to the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region. Both the presence of leaders and the presence of this weapon show the lethal blend of China–Russia defense cooperation and North Korea’s accelerating missile tests.

Some even call this alliance the Cold War’s revived axis, this China-Russia-North Korea axis, which has intensified diplomatic exchanges and all. The presence of senior Chinese and Russian leaders watching a North Korean display featuring nuclear-capable systems, at the 80th anniversary of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), for the first time in a decade, is an example of this close tie. As per The Diplomat, China is no longer feared to stand with the region's most sanctioned regimes. In the international academic circle, the phrase “axis of autocracies” is

gaining more importance. They focus on opposition to Western sanctions and stand against the US influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

China has a two-pronged approach in the Korean Peninsula; they try to maintain a good diplomatic relationship with South Korea, but at the same time, they support Pyongyang to have the upper hand in defending against the US in this region.

Russia, after the war against Ukraine, faced a lot of sanctions from Western countries, so they are trying to unite and form a group, and even shift away from the US dollar and start using their own currency. These all are interconnected beds of a chain, and they are creating a strong parallel global and economic order in their own interest. This interconnection between China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran is also part of this; they will recalibrate their power in Asia.

It is not just a military display; this display also aims to influence internal politics. Some researchers are saying that compared to Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping doesn't have good relations with the PLA's higher officials. He has also done an anti-corruption campaign. They are also facing allegations due to rising defense budgets and an expanding military-industrial complex. Xi Jinping is trying to keep all these issues under the surface through this sort of parade. He is also projecting to his people about the capability and future ambition.

Connecting Economic Concessions to Military Signaling

China's use of zero-tariff diplomacy and military symbolism is a combined dual-track strategy used to rephrase the power dynamic in the global power structure. There are two methods from the economic and security strategies used to build their structural power. Nowadays, nations are adopting smart power, which is a combination of hard power and soft power; here, these methods adopted by them can also be seen as a usage of smart power.

Through the economic tools, they will get loyalty from the African nation, as well as a huge market with a large population. Another important fact is the resources that lie inside the African soil; due to this diplomatic and economic interdependence, China can easily get these raw materials in the name of development and trade. It seems a win-win situation, but there are also some hidden truths.

From the new informal alliance, China is trying to build a new bloc that will have a say in global politics, as well as focus on projecting its new axis. We can also narrate that in the rise of the USA, European countries played a great role, so for China, they need a strong backing. At the same time, we can see that Iran, North Korea, and Russia have not had good relations with the West, so they are searching for space, and this platform emerged.

In conclusion, it is evident that China is using a dual strategy of Tariffs and Tanks. They are continuously struggling to become as equal as the USA; they are trying in all possible ways. They are trying to focus on the global south to build an alternative to challenge the US-led order. Through the financial concession, they get diplomatic support, and from the new alliance, they also get support; by this, China is trying to build a narrative of the protector or the friend of the avoided ones in the world order.