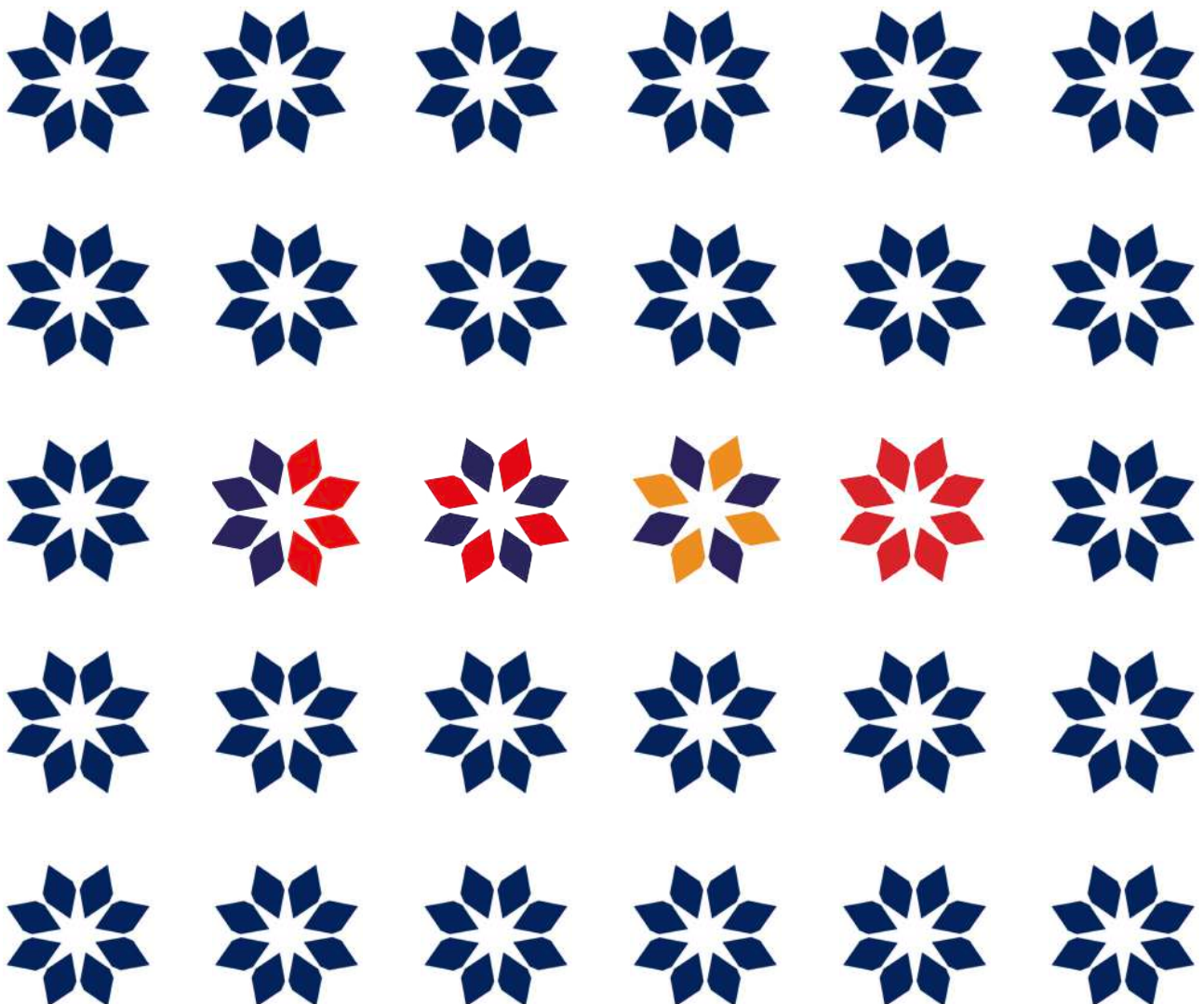




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TABLE OF CONTENTS

p.3 Editorial.

by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet,
Editorial Director and former diplomat.

p.6 Asian news.

by Pierre Haski,
Journalist for France Inter.

p.11 China's industrialization of critical mineral supply chains: A historical perspective.

by Marion Labouré (YL France China 2026)
and Camilla Siazon,
Managing Director & Research Analyst,
Deutsche Bank Research Institute.

p.12 Taiwan's democratic exception.

by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet,
Former diplomat.

p.17 Japan: the end of Pacifism?

by CHEN Yo-Jung,
Former French diplomat.

p.24 Unsilenced: Women, Power, and the Structures That Must Change.

by Garima Purohit,
Architect, Designer & Women
Entrepreneur.

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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Editorial Director and former diplomat

EDITORIAL

Rare Earths and Asia: The Geopolitics of Critical Resources.

Rare earths now occupy a central place in the global economy, at the intersection of the energy, digital and military transitions.

Behind their misleading name—these elements are not always rare in geological terms, but rather “critical” to countries’ economies—lies a group of metals with chemical properties that are essential for advanced technologies: permanent magnets, batteries, screens, radars and military equipment. In this strategic economy, Asia has emerged as the heart of the global system, both because of its resources and its industrial capabilities.

China’s dominance in rare earths is one of the major geopolitical developments of the early 21st century. It accounts for approximately 60 to 70% of global rare earth production and, above all, nearly 85 to 90% of refining and chemical separation capacity.

Since the 1990s, Beijing has gradually built a near-hegemonic position, not only in extraction but, more importantly, in the crucial stages of refining and processing.

The vast Bayan Obo deposit in Inner Mongolia symbolises this mining power, but the core of China’s advantage lies in its ability to process ores and produce high-value-added components. Today, China accounts for a large majority of global capacity for the chemical separation and refining of rare earths, giving it significant strategic leverage. This situation is the

result of a proactive industrial policy combining massive investment, environmental standards that were for a long time more permissive than those in Western countries, and a determination to control a resource considered critical.

Other Asian countries play complementary, less visible but nonetheless essential roles. Myanmar, for example, has become a key supplier of heavy rare earths—particularly dysprosium and terbium—the most sought-after elements, which are indispensable for the manufacture of high-performance magnets. Deposits in the north of the country, particularly in Kachin State, directly supply Chinese industry.

This relationship illustrates a form of asymmetric dependence: Myanmar supplies the raw materials, while China processes them and captures most of the value.

This dynamic also unfolds against the backdrop of Myanmar’s unstable political situation, marked by internal inter-ethnic conflicts and fragile governance, raising major environmental and ethical concerns.

Malaysia, for its part, occupies an intermediate position in the value chain. It does not have significant mineral resources, but it hosts strategic industrial infrastructure, notably Lynas’s plant in Kuantan.

This site is one of the few outside China capable of processing rare earths on a large scale. It illustrates attempts to diversify the global supply chain, supported by countries such as Australia, Japan and the United States. However, this activity has generated local controversy, particularly because of the radioactive waste produced by the processing of certain ores.



Malaysia therefore finds itself at the heart of a classic dilemma: taking advantage of a strategic industrial opportunity while addressing environmental and societal concerns.

Japan, meanwhile, occupies a distinctive position because it has embarked on a strategy to reduce its dependence, combining import diversification, advanced recycling and technological innovation.

Since the supply tensions with China in 2010, Tokyo has reduced its vulnerability by diversifying its sources of supply (Australia), investing in recycling, building strategic stockpiles and supporting alternative partnerships, particularly with Canberra.

India represents another interesting case. The country has significant resources, primarily in the form of monazite sands (cerium, lanthanum, neodymium and thorium) along its coasts. However, their exploitation remains limited by regulatory and technological constraints.

New Delhi is now seeking to develop a complete domestic supply chain, relying on partnerships with international actors such as the United States, Japan and Australia.

This strategy forms part of a broader effort to strengthen its strategic autonomy and integrate into value chains that offer alternatives to those dominated by China. Nevertheless, many challenges remain, particularly in terms of industrial capacity and competitiveness.

Beyond these examples, Southeast Asia and Central Asia have potential that remains largely underexploited. Countries such as Vietnam and Kazakhstan possess promising resources, but their development is constrained by technical, financial, political and environmental factors.

Indonesia has promising rare earth deposits, as well as other strategic minerals such as tungsten, tantalum and antimony. Part of Indonesia's potential also comes from nickel-processing residues—the country being the world's leading nickel producer—and tin-processing residues, which contain small quantities of recoverable rare earths.

Asia's centrality in the rare earth sector can also be explained by the geography of demand. The continent is a major hub of industrial production, particularly in the electronics, automotive and renewable energy sectors.

The manufacture of permanent magnets, one of the main applications of so-called rare earths, is largely concentrated in China, Japan and South Korea. This proximity between raw-material production, industrial processing and final demand strengthens regional integration and gives Asia a lasting competitive advantage. Rare earths have thus become an instrument of power. China has not hesitated to use its dominant position as diplomatic leverage, particularly during trade tensions with Japan or the United States.

This geopolitical dimension has led Western powers to recognise their vulnerability and launch initiatives to secure their supplies [1]. However, rebuilding alternative value chains is likely to be a lengthy and costly process, as it requires the recreation of highly complex mining, chemical and industrial capabilities.

Furthermore, the environmental challenges associated with rare earth exploitation are particularly acute in Asia.

Extraction and refining processes are often polluting, generating toxic and radioactive waste. In some countries, weak regulations or their incomplete enforcement have resulted in significant damage to ecosystems. This situation fuels local tensions and could, in the long term, call into question the sustainability of certain production models.

Finally, the future of rare earths in Asia will depend on several key factors: changes in global demand, technological advances (particularly in recycling and substitution), and geopolitical dynamics.

While China is likely to retain a dominant position in the medium term, the rise of alternative actors (Australia, the United States, Canada, Brazil and Vietnam, among others) and the diversification of supply chains could gradually rebalance the system.

The rare earth landscape can therefore no longer be reduced to a binary opposition between Asia and the West. Rather, it is a hierarchical system: a dominant China at its centre, a structured and diversified industrial Asia, and a group of Western and intermediate powers (the United States, Europe, India and South Korea) pursuing strategies to reduce their dependence to varying degrees.



This system remains profoundly asymmetric, but it is now undergoing a gradual transformation under the combined effects of the energy transition and global geopolitical tensions.

[1] See <https://www.elysee.fr/G7evian/2026/06/17/declaration-des-chefs-detat-et-de-gouvernement-du-g7-sur-la-securisation-des-chaines-dapprovisionnement-en-minerais-critiques>

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

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Pierre Haski
Journalist

Asian news

Géopolitique, a podcast offering a perspective on international affairs.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

August 6 - Japan, Germany: yesterday's "defeated powers" are rearming.

In the past, Japan and Germany knew that the United States would come to their aid in the event of aggression. It was a certainty; today, it is becoming a hypothesis. Like Tokyo, Berlin is therefore now investing heavily in its defence. This is not only a strategic turning point; it also marks the turning of a political page: that of the international order born in 1945.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

July 21 - In India: having a degree but no future.

Thousands of young Indians are marching to demand the resignation of the Education Minister following the revelation of yet another examination fraud. A scandal in itself, of course,

but one that also raises the spectre of a rigged social contract in an already highly unequal country. Organised at the call of the Cockroach Party, the protest denounces the lack of prospects for India's youth and, above all, draws attention to unemployment among young graduates.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

July 20 - AI: Beijing's carefully calculated generosity

China has positioned itself as a patron of artificial intelligence. For Xi Jinping, "the development of AI should not be a solo performance by a single country, but a symphony of international cooperation." The message is clear: behind these lyrical tones, Beijing intends to present itself as the alternative model to the United States.

▶ [Listen to the podcast](#)

Pierre Haski

French journalist, former correspondent in South Africa, the Middle East, and China for Agence France Presse (AFP) and then for the newspaper *Libération*, co-founder of the news website *Rue89*, Pierre HASKI has been president of Reporters Without Borders since 2017. Since 2018, he has been providing insight into international politics through his morning show "Géopolitique" broadcast on France Inter.



Marion Labouré
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Analysis Nouveaux Regards

China's industrialization of critical mineral supply chains: A historical perspective.

By Marion Labouré (YL France China 2026) and Camilla Siazon

This article reproduces an excerpt from Chapter 2, "Critical Minerals," of the report *The Great Rebalancing*, published in March 2026 by the Deutsche Bank Research Institute and co-authored by Marion Labouré and Camilla Siazon.

No country has capitalized on the critical minerals era more effectively than China. Through a long-term, state-directed industrial strategy and significant investment, China now exercises a near-monopoly over key mineral supply chains, turning industrial scale into a source of significant leverage and a bottleneck for the rest of the world.

This bottleneck is particularly challenging to overcome because it is rooted in technological capacity, is capital-intensive, and is slow to replicate.

Focusing on rare earths as the primary example, the remainder of this section explains how China built, consolidated, and ultimately learned to leverage its industrial advantage in the geopolitical sphere.

China's midstream dominance: the key is capacity, more than reserves.

Up until the late 1980s, the United States was the global leader in rare earth production. The discovery of a large, high-grade rare earth deposit at Mountain Pass, California in 1949 paved the way for mass production of commercial quantities of rare earth elements, which in turn reduced prices and spurred their wider commercial application [1]. France was also once at the forefront of rare-earth processing via its chemical giant Rhone-Poulenc (later acquired by Solvay).

However, western advantage was overtaken as China's leadership recognized the strategic value of its own vast rare earth reserves and launched a concerted effort to develop its domestic production capacity. To do this, the state supported programs that would work on enhancing mining techniques, invested in R&D for rare earth applications, and provided financial backing from state-controlled banks, allowing domestic rare earth companies to operate and scale even without immediate



profitability. As a result, the country's domestic production grew at a rapid average of 40% annually from 1978 to 1989 [2].

As China's rare earth exports increased over the 1990s, and the United States began to prioritize environmental and labor concerns that made rare earth processing less viable, production steadily shifted to China as it became increasingly difficult for non-Chinese producers to compete on price. Globalization, combined with China's emergence as the world's workshop, further encouraged the US and Europe to step back from domestic production as supply chains migrated to China. With cheaper domestic supplies at their disposal, Chinese manufacturers also had the opportunity to scale the production of key end-products such as high-strength magnets and electronics, crowding out foreign competition in downstream manufacturing industries as well.

To consolidate its advantage in rare earth production, authorities simultaneously reduced their export quotas – by 54% between 2005–2010 – to secure resources for domestic demand and regain control over operations [3]. This caused international prices for rare earths to increase dramatically, only for Beijing to later release significant volumes of subsidized output to the markets. This self-reinforcing cycle created an oversupply of unprocessed materials, drove down prices, and solidified China's position as the dominant buyer and processor.

China's control over global prices is reinforced by a lack of external visibility into true rare earth and critical mineral pricing. This is because China's two domestic rare earth exchanges operate with limited transparency, while the *Shanghai Metals Market* publishes indicative price ranges rather than real-time spot prices. Outside of China, the OTC market for these metals is highly opaque, and trading volumes

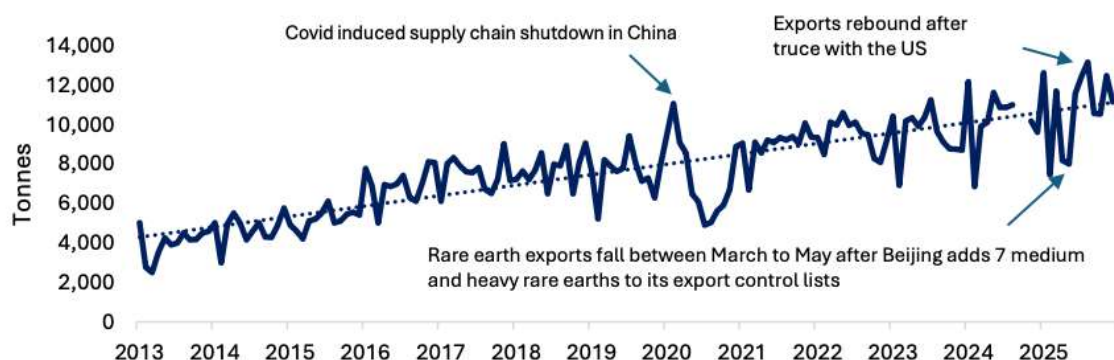
on the *London Metal Exchange* are virtually non-existent. The cessation of public reporting on China's rare earth mining and refining quotas further contributed to price uncertainty and corporate volatility as foreign companies struggled to navigate the less transparent environment.

As a result of these factors, China has dominated rare earth processing conversion capacity since the 1990s, with its share of global production peaking at 97.5% in 2009. Today, China maintains dominant positions in rare earth mining (~60–70%), rare earth processing (~90%), and magnet manufacturing (~93%). However, while the country overwhelmingly dominates the midstream and downstream segments, it still relies on large volumes of raw metal imports to refine and process.

Thus, China is also one of the largest consumers of raw element imports across critical mineral supply chains. To close this gap, Beijing has expanded its strategic stockpiles and increased overseas investments in mines (e.g. Indonesia) [4]. The record \$213.5bn investment in the *Belt and Road initiative* in 2025—including \$32.6bn directed to metals and mining to secure processing capacity and offtake rights – is a recent example of this strategic focus. Through these initiatives, China is also strengthening its position in the upstream segment, moving towards even greater influence across the entire critical mineral value chain.

Finally, over the years, Beijing has consolidated state-owned enterprises in the rare earths industry, enabling vertical integration to control the full value chain. In December 2021, Beijing announced the creation of *China Rare Earth Group Co*, merging three major state-owned enterprises and two research institutions. This new entity now controls roughly 70% of China's domestic rare earth production.

Figure 4: China rare earth exports



Source: Deutsche Bank Research, China General customs. Note: Data for Sep and Oct 2024 not available.

Critical minerals as “Mineral Fordism”.

To understand the relationship between China’s dominance in critical minerals infrastructure and its role in the international order, it is useful to draw an analogy with the global era of American industrialization in the 20th century, a system often referred to as “Fordism”. Fordism was a system of mass production and consumption in the 1920s that relied on standardized parts and moving assembly lines. Its defining feature was vertically integrated production at scale (e.g., the assembly line). Using Stefan Link’s definition in *Forging Global Fordism*, [5] Fordism also functioned as a tool of state-led modernization, enabling countries to accelerate their industrial development and rearmament in the lead-up to World War II.

This dynamic was evident in how both Germany and the Soviet Union actively sought American technology and production methods to rapidly modernize their economies and spread their own state-led ideologies. As Link demonstrates, the open patent system and permissive technology transfer between the US and the USSR and Germany during this time allowed engineers from these countries to study, copy and replicate the methods from the Fordist production systems in Detroit to ultimately build their own industrial and military capabilities [6]. Fordism’s mass industrialization, combined with the US’s post-war soft power, consumer capitalism and embedded liberal institutionalism, helped cement US hegemony in the 20th century [7].

Just as Fordism underpinned the US’s economic and military rise, China has managed to pioneer and master a new production system for critical minerals that now forms the basis of its geopolitical influence. Through the vertical integration of rare earth companies and dominance as the world’s largest downstream off-taker, China has built the world’s most complete processing ecosystem for critical minerals thus far. And just as Ford standardized physical parts by achieving massive economies of scale and driving down costs, China has effectively set global prices and production standards. This is most evident in its pricing power over many critical minerals, which has made it the most rational choice for Western companies to mine raw materials globally and ship them to China for processing.

Today, the US is seeking to re-industrialize its own rare earth supply chains but faces what Link describes as the constraints of the “late developer.” Unlike the tech transfers that took

place between the US and Germany and the Soviet Union during Fordism, in today’s infrastructure-realist world, there appears to be less scope for such cooperation between strategic competitors. The West cannot simply replicate China’s industrial model without also absorbing the immense economic, social, and environmental costs that China accepted during its own decades-long supply-chain transformation.

China’s critical minerals leverage as a tool of infrastructure realism: a rare earths case study

China’s rare earths strategy represents a modern form of “mineral Fordism.” In this section, we examine how its near-total dominance over rare earths and critical minerals has enabled the country to leverage this industrial advantage for geopolitical purposes.

While China has long recognized the advantage of its rare earth dominance and has periodically used export quotas and restrictions since the 1990s, we argue that its initial aim for these controls was to strengthen its own domestic capabilities rather than to exert any geopolitical influence.

The example many cite as the first time China used its market dominance for political leverage was in September 2010, when shipments of rare earths from China to Japan were halted for two months. Many observers concluded that this was a retaliatory measure, since the disruption occurred soon after a hostile clash between Chinese and Japanese boats in the long-disputed waters near the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China). Contrary to popular narrative, however, there is little evidence that China publicly announced a targeted export ban on Japan in 2010. While China threatened “strong countermeasures” against Japan, it never formally confirmed exports cuts of rare earths to Japan [8] leaving analysts to infer intent from trade data. China’s premier at the time also said that “China is not using rare earths as a bargaining chip.” [9] Nevertheless, the market impact was clear: rare earth metal prices surged nearly tenfold following the disruption. Afterwards, Japan (in conjunction with the US and EU) filed a successful WTO trade complaint alleging China’s use of export quotas and other restrictions on rare earths, leading China to dissolve any restrictions by 2015.

The more systematic use of rare earths as leverage began as US-China competition



intensified during the first Trump administration. Then, Beijing's export restrictions on its rare earths and critical minerals became more systematic and concentrated. Indications that the government was beginning to view its rare earth dominance as a strategic tool for national security emerged in 2019, when tensions over the US-China trade war reached a new peak. During a high-profile visit to one of China's major rare earths mining and processing facilities in Ganzhou, President Xi Jinping made remarks to state media that rare earths could be a "new Long March" battleground [10]. This episode can be interpreted as the first informal signal that Beijing had started to consider its near-monopoly over the industry as a point of leverage in its trade dispute with the US. These concerns were amplified one year later when China's National People's Congress passed a new export control law, creating a legal

framework to restrict exports of sensitive materials on national security grounds. While rare earths were not named outright, the new law allowed Beijing to legally halt its exports to specific countries if it chose to do so.

By the 2020s, as global competition evolved into a tech race, China's actions became more explicit. In 2023, it banned the export of specialized rare earth processing equipment and imposed export restrictions on gallium, germanium and certain types of graphite [11]. In 2024, these restrictions were tightened into a full export ban of gallium and germanium to the US.

By 2025, China had developed a range of policy tools related to critical minerals, effectively transforming its industrial dominance into a bargaining tool.

Figure 5: How China controls the whole value chain

Mineral	Use cases	Upstream dominance (mining & reserves)	Midstream dominance (refining & processing)	Key dynamics & strategic actions
Nickel	EV batteries, defence alloys, aerospace materials.	Indonesia holds the largest reserves and leads mined production (67%), but China controls the value chain.	China controlled 65% of global refined nickel output in 2024, primarily through ownership of Indonesian refining capacity.	China, the largest nickel consumer, is increasing stockpiles due to escalating US trade tensions.
Lithium	Lithium-ion batteries for smartphones and laptops, power tools and grid-scale energy storage systems.	Australia, Chile, and China produced ~72% in 2025. China controls 21% of upstream supply.	China controls ~70% of lithium chemical refining. The top three refiners (China, Argentina, Chile) account for ~95% of global capacity.	China's control over the lithium value chain is growing. The US imported over 90% of its lithium-ion battery cells from China in 2024. US response: investment in Canadian mining (e.g., Thacker Pass Mine). In the UK, the country's first commercial lithium plant opened in Feb 2026.
Cobalt	EV and defence batteries, jet engine alloys, industrial gas turbines, electronic warfare systems.	~74% of mined cobalt comes from the DRC, but the IEA projects Indonesia to bring its market position down to 50% by 2040. Chinese companies owned 80% of DRC production in 2024 (EIA).	China refined ~78% of global cobalt market in 2024; primarily for lithium-ion batteries.	China remains the top buyer, driven by its battery industry. The US was 79% net import-reliant for cobalt in 2025. US response: the US is diversifying supply chains with new mining and processing projects, facing challenges from weak prices (e.g., US stake in Trilogy Metals in Alaska).
Copper	Aircraft, ground vehicles, ships, submarines, missiles, AI data centers.	Chile has the world's largest reserves and leads global mining production (23%).	China dominates downstream supply chains, controlling 48% of global refining capacity.	US response: the Trump administration has designed a copper policy to onshore mining and refining production in the US.
Gallium & Germanium	Essential semiconductor materials used in fiber optics, infrared optics, solar technologies, advanced military and biomedical applications.	China controls 99% of gallium production and nearly all of germanium production.	Control over high-purity refined output used for chips and defence is more balanced, with Europe, the US, Japan and the Canada overseeing some parts of the midstream segment.	No US domestic gallium production has existed since 1987, while some limited germanium production occurs. The US also stockpiles germanium in its National Defense stockpile, but no gallium. In 2025, the DoE announced ~\$6mn in funding for gallium.
Tungsten	Steels, aerospace, and military projectiles.	China controls 82% of Tungsten production; also has the world's largest Tungsten reserves.	China refines over 80% of the world's tungsten concentrate into intermediate products.	Tungsten concentrate production ex- China = 21% of total world production. China remains the top consumer of Tungsten. In 2025, China placed several restrictions on critical minerals including Tungsten to the US.
Rare earths	17 minerals critical for defence and tech – F-35 fighter jets, submarines, Tomahawk missiles, radar systems, unmanned aerial vehicles etc), and advanced semiconductor technology.	China dominates the REM supply chain, controlling ~69% of rare earth mining in 2025.	China controls >90% of refining capacity.	IEA projects China will still dominate refining (76%) and mining (51%) by 2030, implying rare earths should remain the frontline in the US-China resource war.
Graphite	Batteries, brake linings, lubricants, powdered metals, refractory applications, and steelmaking.	China controls 78% of graphite production. The US has had no domestic natural graphite production since the 1950s.	China maintains dominance across mining, processing, and anode manufacturing.	The US and EU import around 46% (2021-2025) and 38% (2024) of their graphite from China, respectively. China requires export permits for high-grade graphite (Dec 2023), while the US imposed 93.5% anti-dumping duties on Chinese graphite and anode materials (July 2025). US response: the US is developing its upstream supply chains; the USGS currently tracks five active exploration or development projects in the US.

Sources: Deutsche Bank Research, USGS, IEA, EIA.



[1] "Rare-Earth Metal Prices in the USA Ca. 1960 to 1994," USGS, 2026, <https://www.usgs.gov/publications/rare-earth-metal-prices-usa-ca-1960-1994-0>.

[2] "China's Rare Earths Industry and Its Role in the International Market," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2010, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/RareEarthsBackgroundFINAL.pdf>.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Marion Labouré and Camilla Siazon, "The Top 10 Strategic Commodities to Watch," *Deutsche Bank Research Institute*, October 22, 2025. <https://www.dbresearch.com/PROD/RIPROD/PDFVIEWERPdfUrl=PROD0000000000606588>

[5] Stefan J. Link, *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Contest over the Industrial Order*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[6] Ibid. According to Link, Germany ultimately internalized these methods more effectively than the Soviet Union.

[7] Ibid.

[8] A study by Simon Evenett and Johannes Fritz found that while China certainly applied export restrictions on rare earths during the 2010s, there was no evidence of a targeted

ban on Japan. In fact, it was Australia, not Japan, that witnessed sharp falls in monthly REM exports from China during this period. Simon Evenett and Johannes Fritz, "Revisiting the China-Japan Rare Earths Dispute of 2010," CEPR, July 19, 2023. <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/revisiting-china-japan-rare-earths-dispute-2010>.

[9] Su Qiang, "Rare Earth Will Not Be Used as Bargaining Chip," *China Daily*, October 8, 2010.

[10] The "Long March" comment is seen as a reference to the massive, year-long tactical retreat by the CCP in 1934, as the Red Army escaped the KMT forces during the Civil War. It cemented Mao Zedong's leadership, allowed the weakened party to survive, and is now celebrated as a foundational symbol of perseverance, sacrifice, and strength. Xi's visit occurred soon after the US had blacklisted Huawei and came amidst fears that Beijing would restrict or embargo rare earth exports to the US. Zhou Xin, Wendy Wu, and Kinling Lo, "Xi Jinping Visits Rare-Earth Minerals Facility amid Talk of Use in US Trade War," *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3010977/xi-jinping-visits-rare-earth-minerals-facility-amid-talk-use>

[11] Marion Labouré and Cassidy Ainsworth-Grace, "Rare Earth Metals: What to Expect in 2024 in 10 Slides," *Deutsche Bank Research*, March 26, 2024, https://research.db.com/research/Article?rid=eec2bc46-c2ac-4f07-bcbe-2c75d836a3ee-604&kid=RP0001&documentType=R&wt_ccl=IND-3146993-0000

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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet Editorial Director and former diplomat

Analysis Nouveaux Regards

Taiwan's democratic **exception.**

By Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

The democratisation of [the Republic of China in] Taiwan represents one of the most successful cases of democratic transition in East Asia. It was neither the result of a mechanical diffusion of the Western liberal model nor of the sudden collapse of an authoritarian regime, but rather of a gradual process combining controlled liberalisation, social mobilisation, partisan transformation and identity reconfiguration.

This article argues that Taiwan's democratic consolidation cannot be understood independently of three intertwined dynamics: the internal transformation of the Kuomintang (KMT) regime, the structuring role of social movements, and the permanent strategic pressure exerted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a context of unresolved sovereignty.

Chiang Ching-kuo and Controlled Liberalisation

The first phase of the transition is associated with Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek and heir to the KMT's authoritarian regime. Educated in the Soviet Union before joining the Nationalist security apparatus, he embodied a form of modernising technocratic authoritarianism.

Three years after his father's death in 1975, he was formally elected president by the National Assembly (which had itself retreated to Taiwan), within a still undemocratic one-party system.

His contribution to the democratisation process lay in implementing a strategy of gradual liberalisation without regime collapse. Under his leadership, the state embarked on a gradual political opening in response both to the loss of its international recognition [1] and to the island's rapid socio-economic transformation (described as the "Taiwan Miracle").

Between 1965 and 1985, the island's real GDP grew by an average of 8% per year, while industrialisation transformed an agricultural economy into an export-oriented one. This development had major political consequences, including the emergence of an educated urban middle class and growing social and professional diversification, accompanied by rising public expectations for political participation.

Kaohsiung 1979 and International Pressure

The dangwai 黨外 ("outside the party") movement emerged in the 1970s as an informal opposition. It was marked by episodes of repression, notably the 1979 incident in the southern city of Kaohsiung, which represented a foundational moment in the democratic protest



movement. A demonstration organised around the dissident magazine *Formosa* was violently suppressed, and its main leaders were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Contrary to expectations, the movement's leaders were not executed but sent to serve their sentences in the prison on Green Island (lǚdǎo 綠島), southeast of Taiwan. This restraint in the use of state violence is generally interpreted as the result of diplomatic and strategic pressure exerted by the United States, then Taiwan's principal international supporter in the context of its rivalry with mainland China and, moreover, against the backdrop of the Cold War.

The lifting of martial law in Taiwan on 15 July 1987 constituted the institutional starting point of the democratic transition. In force since 1949 and leading to the period of repression known as the "White Terror" (báisè kǒngbù 白色恐怖) [2] against the local population (147,000 arrests; 3,000 to 4,000 executions), martial law had become increasingly difficult to justify in the face of a more modern and politicised society. From then on, the transition would proceed gradually and without violence.

1986-1989: The Divergence of Chinese and Taiwanese Political Trajectories

From the mid-1980s onwards, the political trajectories of Taiwan and mainland China diverged structurally. In China, student and urban mobilisations emerged as early as 1986 in the context of the "liberal" reforms associated with Hu Yaobang (1915-1989), then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party on the mainland, before he was forced to resign by the CCP's conservative wing.

These mobilisations (the so-called Tiananmen "democracy" movement) reflected growing demands for political reform and action against corruption. In 1989, these dynamics intensified and spread to around two hundred Chinese cities before being brutally suppressed in Beijing by the army on Deng Xiaoping's orders. Taiwan followed the opposite trajectory: cycles of protest were not suppressed but gradually incorporated into the process of institutional transformation.

Lee Teng-hui and the Transformation of the State

Lee Teng-hui, the first Taiwan-born president, educated in Japan and the United States, played a central role in transforming the regime. A member of the KMT but shaped by a distinct

intellectual trajectory owing to his Hakka (kejia 客家) origins and his Japanese and later American education, he embodied the internalisation of the democratic transition within the former authoritarian party itself.

His fundamental contribution lay in the constitutional transformation of the state. Under his presidency, the reforms of the 1990s put an end to the fiction of a government representing the whole of China. The forced retirement of the mainland parliamentarians known as "frozen in office" between 1991 and 1992, followed by the introduction of direct universal presidential suffrage in 1996, completed the territorialisation of Taiwan's political system.

For President Lee Teng-hui, relations between Taiwan and mainland China were to be regarded as relations between two distinct states (liangguolun 兩國論, the so-called "two-state theory"), rather than as an internal relationship within a single country, thereby making him the principal architect of the island's institutional democratisation.

From then on, the state gradually redefined itself as a political entity rooted in Taiwan, through a process of institutional and symbolic Taiwanisation (taiwanhua 台灣化).

The DPP and the Politicisation of Taiwanese Identity

Despite the ban on political parties, the Democratic Progressive Party, Minjindang 民進黨 (DPP), was founded in 1986 and subsequently played a structuring role in transforming protest into a political alternative. Intellectual figures such as international law professor Peng Ming-min ("the father of independence") contributed to the development of democratic thought linked to the redefinition of Taiwanese political identity [3].

Student movements were a central actor in this evolution. A major turning point came with the "Wild Lily Student Movement" (yebaihe xueyun 野百合學運) in 1990, when thousands of students occupied the square in front of the Presidential Office in Taipei to demand constitutional reform and an end to institutions inherited from mainland China. In contrast to his Chinese counterpart, President Lee Teng-hui chose to meet representatives of the movement, thereby incorporating protest into the institutional process.

The "Sunflower Student Movement" (taiyanghua xueyun 太陽花學運) of 2014 marked a new phase.



By occupying parliament to protest against an economic agreement with China concluded by the KMT, which had temporarily returned to power (2008–2016), students challenged not only a public policy but also the trajectory of economic integration with Beijing. The movement strengthened the DPP and durably reshaped the political landscape.

Under the Constitution of the Republic of China [in Taiwan], the president is elected by direct universal suffrage for a four-year term, renewable once. Within this framework, every president elected since the transition has been re-elected for a second term. This regularity reflects the stability of the electoral system and the normalisation of alternation in power as a central mechanism of political legitimacy.

Chen Shui-bian and the Institutionalisation of Alternation in Power

Chen Shui-bian, a former human rights lawyer and figure of the democratic opposition, became in 2000 the first president to come to power through political alternation. A member of the DPP who emerged from the pro-democracy movements of the 1980s, he embodied the assertion of a Taiwanese identity distinct from mainland China.

His term in office marked the consolidation of electoral mechanisms and the growing politicisation of questions of identity and sovereignty. His attempt to hold a self-determination referendum at the same time as the presidential election nevertheless failed in March 2004, although more than 90% of voters supported it, as turnout remained below the legal threshold of 50%.

Ma Ying-jeou and Stabilisation through Economic Interdependence

Ma Ying-jeou, born in Hong Kong, a US-educated lawyer and rising KMT figure, was elected in 2008. His term was based on a strategy of normalising relations with mainland China through intensified economic and institutional exchanges, as well as through the “1992 Consensus”, according to which there is only “one China”, with each side free to have its own interpretation.

This phase contributed to temporarily stabilising relations between the two entities by creating a formula sufficiently ambiguous to allow dialogue to continue. It encouraged economic rapprochement, but without resolving the

fundamental political dispute between the two sides of the Strait.

Tsai Ing-wen and Democratic Consolidation under Pressure

Tsai Ing-wen, a UK-educated lawyer and specialist in international law, became president in 2016 and the first woman in Taiwan to hold the office.

Her principal contribution lay in consolidating a mature democracy under intense external pressure (China). Her status quo doctrine combines the view that any formal declaration of independence is unnecessary with an affirmation of Taiwan’s sovereignty. In doing so, she strengthened the institutional resilience of the democratic regime [4].

Lai Ching-te and Continuity in a Polarised Context

William Lai (Ching-te), a former physician, became president in 2024 after serving as Tsai Ing-wen’s vice-president, on a pro-independence platform. His election illustrates the institutional continuity of the democratic regime, but also the intensification of identity-based polarisation surrounding relations with China. He has adopted the position defined by Tsai: Taiwan is already a sovereign state under the name Republic of China (Taiwan); there is therefore no need to formally declare the island’s independence.

Lai’s election forms part of the continuity of this consolidated democratic trajectory. It confirms the institutional stability of the system and the normalisation of political alternation, but also the persistence of a fundamental divide over relations with China.

However, this internal consolidation is also taking place in an increasingly constrained strategic environment. Politically, domestic balances remain sensitive to cross-Strait dynamics, notably through the positions of the KMT and its initiatives for dialogue with Beijing (see the April 2026 visit by the new chairwoman of the Nationalist Party, Cheng Li-wun), which regularly revive debate over the island’s strategic orientation.

Above all, pressure exerted by the PRC now constitutes the central external factor in the evolution of the communist regime. It no longer relies solely on conventional military deterrence, but on a multidimensional grey-zone strategy: near-daily incursions by fighter aircraft into Taiwan’s air defence identification zone,



cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and diplomatic pressure aimed at reducing its international space. These actions are regularly accompanied by military exercises simulating blockade scenarios or control of maritime routes, and even invasion contingencies.

In this context, the future of Taiwanese democracy no longer depends solely on its internal consolidation, which is now firmly established, but on its capacity for resilience in the face of structural and enduring strategic pressure.

Taiwan thus appears as a fully institutionalised democracy under permanent geopolitical pressure, whose stability rests on a fragile balance between internal cohesion, social mobilisation inherited from the cycles of student activism (Wild Lilies and Sunflowers), and the management of an increasingly conflictual regional environment between Beijing and Washington.

Hong Kong as a Counter-Model

Added to this is the evolution of Hong Kong, which has experienced a gradual restriction of its political freedoms, culminating in the mass popular mobilisations of 2014 and 2019.

The “one country, two systems” principle, which Deng Xiaoping had also intended to apply to Taiwan, subsequently gave way to increasing restrictions on political space, particularly following the adoption of China’s National Security Law in 2020, contradicting the commitments made by Beijing in the 1984 Sino-British “Joint Declaration”. This declaration guaranteed the former colony a high degree of autonomy until 2047 (except in matters of defence and foreign policy), as well as the preservation of its rights and freedoms of the press, speech, assembly and religion [5].

Once again, this contrast with Beijing reinforces the perception of Taiwan as the only polity from the Chinese-speaking world to have achieved complete and lasting democratisation, thereby consolidating the process of Taiwanisation.

Structural Fragilities of Taiwanese Democracy

Despite its institutional consolidation, Taiwanese democracy nevertheless remains characterised by certain structural vulnerabilities.

The first is its geopolitical vulnerability, linked to China’s immediate military proximity and the absence of a formal security guarantee (see the

ambiguities of the United States’ Taiwan Relations Act, which in theory guarantees Taiwan’s security, compounded by President Trump’s transactional approach), creating permanent strategic uncertainty that could potentially influence the future choices of Taiwanese voters.

The second lies in identity-based polarisation, which continues to structure political competition between competing visions of the nation.

Although the KMT is no longer hegemonic, it remains one of the two pillars of Taiwan’s political system, capable of alternating between government and opposition and influencing relations with Beijing, particularly as the Nationalist Party, together with its current ally, the Taiwan People’s Party (8 seats), currently controls the Taiwanese parliament (Legislative Yuan) in terms of seats, with 52 seats compared with the DPP’s 51.

Finally, Taiwanese democracy faces influence and disinformation operations conducted by mainland China, aimed at weakening its social cohesion and trust in institutions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Taiwanese democracy cannot be understood without this dual dynamic: on the one hand, a rapid and relatively successful process of institutional democratisation; on the other, a gradual process of Taiwanisation that has redefined the identity foundations of politics.

Together, these developments have resulted in a stable and competitive democratic system, but one that is also marked by structural tensions related to the question of national identity and external pressure. Taiwan thus illustrates the case of a democracy built both from above (through reforms initiated by those in power) and from below (through pressure from society), whose vitality and stability depend on its ability to reconcile political pluralism and identity assertion in an increasingly constrained geopolitical environment.

[1] Marked notably by the expulsion of the Republic of China (RoC) from the United Nations on 25 October 1971 in favour of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing in 1979.

[2] Following the incident of 28 February 1947, known as *ererbá* 二二八, triggered by the mistreatment of a contraband cigarette vendor by government agents. This altercation acted as a spark among the Taiwanese population, which revolted and was subsequently violently repressed by the KMT regime.



[3] In 1964, Peng Ming-min and two colleagues drafted the "Formosa Declaration" (Taiwan liangguo lun 台灣兩國論), calling for an end to the Kuomintang dictatorship and the establishment of democracy in Taiwan. This text is regarded as one of the first structured calls for Taiwan's democratisation and self-determination.

[4] See Tsai Ing-wen's interview with the BBC on 14 January 2020: "We are already a functionally independent country.

And we have our own government, we have our own elections, of course, presidential election, and that is a way to express that we do have sovereignty, and our people elect their own leaders. So, effectively we are a country already." See President Tsai interviewed by BBC, 18 January 2020, [english.president.gov.tw](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54444444).

[5] Suzanne Pepper, *Keeping Democracy at Bay in Hong Kong*, 2007.

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

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Analysis Nouveaux Regards

Japan: the end of Pacifism?

By CHEN Yo-Jung

Known for the absolute pacifism it has jealously guarded since the end of the war 81 years ago, Japan has just caused widespread astonishment by lifting, in April 2026, the self-imposed ban on exports of lethal weapons that had been in force since 1967.

The move, which came after the decision to bring forward by one year the timetable for doubling the defence budget from 1% to 2% of GDP, has been described as a "break with pacifism" (New York Times), an "abandonment of pacifism" (Nikkei Asia), a "historic rearmament" (Asia Times), and even a "dangerous remilitarisation" (Chinese government) of the country.

Geopolitical Context

The United States' retreat into itself since Donald Trump's return to power and the resulting geopolitical instability are pushing America's allies to each seek their own path to survival in a world where the US security guarantee can no longer be taken for granted.

As part of this readjustment, middle powers are tending to close ranks with one another, while some appear to be turning increasingly towards the other superpower, China. In Asia, growing signs of a US strategic retreat are leading Southeast Asian countries to reconsider the subtle neutrality they have so far sought to

maintain between the two superpowers, and to lean increasingly towards Beijing.

A survey conducted this year by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows that 52% of these countries would opt for China (compared with 48% for the US) if forced to choose between Washington and Beijing. This marks a clear reversal from the 2025 results, when 52% still preferred the US to China (47%).

In Northeast Asia, the geopolitical climate is already highly tense. Three democratic US allies (Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) face three belligerent nuclear-armed authoritarian powers (China, North Korea and Russia).

The perceptible decline in US influence is forcing these allies to readjust, without calling into question their alliance with Washington.

South Korea, for example, is undertaking a new economic opening towards China while strengthening its own defence capabilities, including plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Donald Trump's unpredictability has also led to a warming of relations between Seoul and Tokyo, long-standing rivals divided by lingering resentment over Japanese colonisation. Since 2005, Seoul has also been one of NATO's four Indo-Pacific partners (IP4 = South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand).



Japan: Farewell to Pacifism?

Within this broader strategic realignment of middle powers caught between the two superpowers, Japan is an exception insofar as it rules out, at least for the time being, the option of rapprochement with China. Bilateral relations with Beijing are at their lowest point since a head of government considered excessively belligerent and nationalist by Beijing came to power in Tokyo.

Tokyo's response to the growing instability of its geostrategic environment is therefore to embark on a new stage of rearmament, in defiance of the strict pacifism prescribed by its Constitution since 1946.

This approach enables Japan both to satisfy its US ally's demand for greater security autonomy and to fill the foreseeable strategic vacuum. As part of what Beijing condemns as dangerous remilitarisation, Tokyo reopened exports of lethal weapons in April 2026, having banned them since 1967.

Freed from this constraint, Japan is using arms sales and security partnerships to develop a network of regional quasi-alliances (Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, etc.) which, according to Nikkei Asia, appears to reflect a desire to secure the Indo-Pacific region, through which its vital natural-resource supply routes pass. According to the New York Times, "Japan is now projecting itself as a new force for stability and power in a region shaken by China's aggressive posture and the political volatility of Donald Trump's America."

According to Huong Le Thu, Asia director at the International Crisis Group, quoted by the US newspaper, "the new Japan now represents the stability and continuity that the region previously expected from the US, preparing to fill the leadership vacuum and now offering its 'hard power' in addition to its 'soft power'."

As we shall see below, Japan, now less constrained by its traditional pacifism, is also developing security partnerships with European countries. The volatility of the Trump era is not the sole motivation behind Japan's chosen course.

Indeed, this course responds first and foremost to the nationalist agenda championed by Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae. A member of the far-right wing of the ruling LDP (Liberal Democratic Party), the new head of government has long

been known for her desire to break with the pacifist Constitution in order to fulfil her ambition of normalising the country's military status. From the perspective of the right, such military normalisation would allow Japan to defend itself without the constraints of a pacifism considered utopian.

Pacifism: A History

Following its surrender in 1945, the country, then deeply repentant over its militarist past, was compelled to accept the pacifist and democratic Constitution imposed on it by the American occupier in 1946. Under Article 9 of this Constitution [1], Japan forever renounces war and prohibits itself from maintaining land, sea and air forces.

However, the Korean War in 1950 and the urgent need for allies to contain the advance of communism in Asia soon led Washington to tolerate the creation in Japan, in 1950, of a "Police Reserve", which was upgraded in 1954 into the "Self-Defense Forces" (SDF), based on the interpretation that "self-defence" is not explicitly prohibited by the Constitution. With the help of economic growth, Japan's SDF, even with a budget limited to 1% of GDP, eventually developed into one of the most powerful and modern armed forces (or rather, self-defence forces!) in Asia today.

Despite constant hostility from conservatives, who regard it as dangerously utopian, Article 9 has always enjoyed strong support from a pacifist and antimilitarist population. The pacifism it advocates facilitated the reconstruction of a country devastated by war.

Instead of spending a substantial budget on defence, post-war Japan, protected by the US nuclear umbrella, was able to concentrate all its national resources on rebuilding the country, becoming the world's second-largest economy in the 1980s.

More than that, Article 9 is valued above all for having guaranteed Japan lasting peace since the end of the war. Tokyo has always been able to invoke Article 9 in response to Washington's repeated pressure for Japan to make a military contribution to "American wars" (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, etc.). For its defenders, Article 9 thus constitutes a formidable shield protecting the country from upheavals elsewhere in the world.

In addition to its pacifist Constitution, Japan sought to reinforce its pacifism by imposing on



itself, in 1967, the “Three Principles on Arms Exports”, under which the archipelago prohibited arms exports to (1) communist countries, (2) countries subject to UN sanctions and (3) countries involved in armed conflict.

Under pressure, notably from the United States, this self-imposed restriction on arms exports was successively relaxed before being replaced in 2014 by the “Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment” (the word “arms” was no longer used...). Subject to strict conditions regarding recipients, these principles paved the way for exports of five categories of “non-lethal” equipment (rescue, transport, vigilance, surveillance and mine clearance). Japan was thus able to supply bulletproof vests to Ukraine, as well as radars and “unarmed”, and therefore non-lethal, maritime patrol vessels to the Philippines.

In addition to its self-imposed restriction on arms exports, the only country to have suffered atomic bombings adopted, by parliamentary resolution in 1967, the “Three Non-Nuclear Principles”, consisting of (1) not possessing, (2) not producing and (3) not introducing nuclear weapons into national territory.

The third principle, however, is controversial, as it is evident that US forces stationed in Japan possess nuclear weapons. How, then, can nuclear weapons be banned from national territory while living under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella? This is one of the contradictions that the current government intends to resolve in the coming months.

A Long Process of Gradual “Rearmament”

However much the world may be surprised by Japan’s “historic turning point and abandonment of pacifism” (New York Times) following its decision to authorise exports of lethal weapons, it must be acknowledged that this is not the first time the country has “rearmed”.

In fact, efforts to relax the political, legal and constitutional constraints limiting post-war Japan’s defence began immediately after the promulgation of the pacifist Constitution in 1946.

In contrast to a population firmly committed to the lasting peace guaranteed by the pacifist Constitution, there has always been a current of opposition to this pacifism, regarded as dangerously utopian in the country’s hostile geostrategic environment. This opposition

comes mainly from the right, including the ruling LDP.

Within this party, whose founding principle is precisely constitutional revision, some wish to make Japan a militarily “normal” country capable of fulfilling its strategic commitments, while others dream of a return to the good old days when the country was respected as a militarist imperial power. Still others challenge the foreign (American) origins of the Constitution and, regardless of pacifism, call for a new and genuinely sovereign fundamental law.

Over the eight decades since the Constitution was adopted, successive Japanese leaders, almost exclusively from the LDP, have all expressed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, their desire for constitutional amendment [2]. Unable to meet the conditions required for amendment, they have so far resorted to “reinterpretations” of the Constitution to carry out a succession of rearmament measures.

To begin with, the creation in 1954 of the Japanese “Self-Defense Forces” (SDF) and the National Defense Agency (upgraded to a ministry in 2007) already constituted the first in this series of rearmament measures. Since then, the ruling right and pressure from Washington have pushed Tokyo to undertake successive further steps in rearmament, each time testing the limits of the pacifism prescribed by the Constitution.

Thus, while a Japan-US security treaty signed in 1960 reinforced the country’s dependence on its American ally, Japan, which had rejoined the United Nations in 1956, adopted a law in 1991, the year of the first Gulf War, allowing the SDF to participate in UN peacekeeping operations.

Although the legislation imposed strict conditions regarding neutrality, the use of weapons and intervention limited to non-conflict zones, and although such operations took place under the UN flag, this first deployment of Japanese military personnel beyond the country’s borders caused considerable concern at the time, both domestically and among Japan’s neighbours, foremost among them China, where memories of the brutal atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army on their soil remained vivid. Nevertheless, in 1992, Japanese peacekeepers participated in the reconstruction of Cambodia.

In 1999, a new Japan-US security agreement paved the way for logistical support by the SDF to US forces in the event of conflict. The SDF



consequently refuelled US ships in the Indian Ocean during the war in Afghanistan following the attacks of 11 September 2001. This represented a new stage of remilitarisation that was viewed very negatively by neighbouring countries, since the SDF were no longer wearing UN blue helmets for this extraterritorial mission. In 2003, yielding to US pressure and again without UN cover, the SDF took part in humanitarian and infrastructure reconstruction missions in non-conflict areas of Iraq.

Thus, having originally started from a principle of “exclusively defence-oriented self-defence” confined to the national territory, Japan’s SDF “rearmed” over the course of half a century to the point where they became free to operate beyond national borders without UN cover and without any amendment to the text of the Constitution.

Shinzo Abe’s return to power in 2012 marked a further step in Japan’s gradual remilitarisation. Still unable to amend the Constitution, the nationalist Prime Minister, who remained in power until 2020 and was assassinated in 2022, succeeded, through a “Cabinet decision”, in decreeing another major reinterpretation of Article 9.

Tokyo thereby granted itself the right to “collective” self-defence, meaning that the SDF could intervene militarily to defend allies even when Japan’s own security was not directly threatened. For critics, including liberal newspapers such as the Asahi Shimbun, the concept of “self-defence” tolerated by the Constitution was thereby being trampled underfoot.

In 2009, the commissioning of the “destroyer” Hiyuga (13,500 tonnes) raised the question of whether the SDF had shifted from the principle of “defensive self-defence” to that of “offensive self-defence”.

Although officially classified as a “destroyer”, the flat-deck vessel nevertheless looked every inch an aircraft carrier... Initially presented as a harmless helicopter carrier, the “destroyer” was refitted a year later to carry vertical-take-off F-35 fighter-bombers.

The question of whether the principle of defensive self-defence was being exceeded arose again in 2022 when, under Prime Minister Kishida, Tokyo adopted the “Three National Security Documents”. Among other things, these provided for equipping the SDF with long-range missiles for counter-attacks on enemy territory

and with the capability to strike enemy bases pre-emptively, even before an attack against Japan had taken place.

Once again, critics, including the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, regarded this as a direct violation of the Constitution’s principle of “defensive self-defence” because, in theory, it opens up the possibility of unprovoked aggression against an adversary.

In April 2026, while participating in the “Balikatan” exercises in the Philippines alongside French, US and Australian forces, the Japanese contingent of 1,400 troops attracted considerable attention by firing missiles for the first time “outside national territory”. Should this action be described as yet another step in Japan’s series of remilitarisations?

In July this year, the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile by a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine in the Pacific reignited debate over a possible revision of the “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” and strengthened the temptation to equip Japan’s SDF with nuclear-powered submarines. For the time being, the debate necessarily remains hypothetical, given the still deeply rooted anti-nuclear sentiment in the only country to have suffered atomic bombings.

Finally, the planned revision of the “Three National Security Documents” at the end of 2026 is expected to provide a further boost to Japan’s defence capabilities, with an emphasis on promoting the defence industry, counter-strike capabilities on enemy territory and a possible revision of the principle prohibiting the introduction of nuclear weapons.

Thus, through special legislation and bold reinterpretations of the Constitution, Tokyo has succeeded over the past eight decades in carrying out a series of successive rearmament measures despite resistance from a firmly pacifist public.

That said, no Japanese leader has yet succeeded in overcoming the population’s firm attachment to Article 9 sufficiently to put the country on the path towards genuine constitutional revision.

Towards “Proactive Pacifism”

Recently, growing awareness of threats in Japan’s immediate neighbourhood appears to have led the Japanese to soften their deep attachment to constitutional pacifism, to the point that a slight majority now tolerates a



limited revision of the Constitution. This shift in attitude has led Asia Times to describe the Japanese as “reluctant realists”, if not “pragmatic realists”.

This “Yes, but...” attitude is confirmed by a survey conducted last February by the University of Tsukuba. According to the survey, 49.3% of the population now accepts a constitutional amendment. However, the Prime Minister’s plan to double military spending receives barely 38% support, while only 32% approve of the proposal to abolish the “Three Non-Nuclear Principles”. It is also worth noting that 67% of respondents to an April survey by the Asahi newspaper said they opposed the liberalisation of lethal arms exports decided that same month.

Another survey conducted in April 2026 by the Yomiuri newspaper indicates that even this slight majority in favour of constitutional amendment appears to have eroded somewhat since the arrival in power of a Prime Minister known for her particularly belligerent nationalism. According to the survey, support for constitutional revision, although still a majority, fell from 60% in 2025 to 57% this year, while opposition rose from 36% to 40%.

The same survey also shows that, irrespective of the majority in favour of constitutional revision, the public remains unequivocal in its support for Article 9, with 80% opposed to any amendment of paragraph 1 (the permanent renunciation of war). As for paragraph 2 (the prohibition on maintaining armed forces), the public appears more ambivalent, with 48% in favour of retaining it and 47% in favour of amending it.

Moreover, a majority of 60% supports retaining paragraph 2 while accepting the addition of a clause constitutionally legitimising the SDF. This view reflects a widely shared desire to remedy the contradiction between the constitutional prohibition on armed forces and the now unavoidable existence of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces.

This evolution in public opinion, from an absolute defence of constitutional pacifism towards hesitant tolerance of limited constitutional revision, coincides with the arrival in power last November of Takaichi Sanae, the most aggressively nationalist of Japan’s successive post-war leaders, who has never concealed her hostility towards Article 9 or her ambition to amend the Constitution.

With an exceptionally high approval rating of around 65% in February this year, together with

a historic majority of more than two-thirds in the Lower House following the snap general election last April, the Prime Minister appears confident that the opportunity is greater than ever to achieve what none of her predecessors managed to accomplish: formally launch the process of constitutional revision.

Thus, while bringing forward by one year the doubling of the military budget and ending the ban on exports of lethal weapons, Ms Takaichi has relaunched the work of the parliamentary commission on constitutional amendment, with the aim of holding a vote and referendum during 2027.

At the same time, Tokyo concluded a major contract last May for the sale of eleven modern frigates (very much “lethal” this time!) to Australia. Far more than a simple arms sale, this first major Japanese arms contract is helping, according to Nikkei Asia, to cement bilateral relations within the framework of a quasi-alliance in response to China’s advance in the Pacific.

In the same vein, plans are being considered to sell the same frigates to New Zealand and to supply “second-hand” Japanese warships to the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. With Manila in particular, Tokyo is strengthening military cooperation, including intelligence sharing and the provision of defence equipment, in an effort to enhance the country’s ability to defend itself against China’s coercive advance in the South China Sea.

With India, Ms Takaichi’s visit to New Delhi in July helped cement plans for security, industrial and economic cooperation. Tokyo is particularly keen to keep New Delhi within the camp of democratic Indo-Pacific allies amid Washington’s apparent loss of interest in the QUAD, the four-way US-Australia-India-Japan alliance strongly supported by Tokyo.

It goes without saying that the legalisation of lethal arms exports was very warmly welcomed by Japan’s arms industry, although, according to the business daily Nihon Keizai, Japanese arms manufacturers, long confined to the SDF as their sole customer, will initially struggle to achieve the production scale needed to compete in the global arms market.

Gradually emerging from its rigid pacifism, Japan is now openly developing defence partnerships with NATO and European Union countries, some of these projects dating back to 2022. It thus joins South Korea, Australia and New



Zealand as one of NATO's four privileged partners (IP4) in Asia.

The Japan-NATO partnership is not new, but it has taken on a new dimension under Ms Takaichi, as Tokyo now positions itself as a more assertive partner, freed from the past constraints of its pacifism. In January 2025, Japan upgraded its representation to NATO to embassy status. In June 2026, four officers from the Japanese SDF were seconded to NATO as part of the assistance programme for Ukraine. With Europe, the UK-Japan-Italy tripartite "GCAP" programme to develop a next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035 is in full swing and could be expanded to include Poland, Sweden and Canada.

With London, Tokyo has a reciprocal troop access agreement, while military exercises have taken place in Japan with French and British forces. In April 2026, 30 ambassadors to NATO were in Tokyo to explore new partnership opportunities, which already include cooperation in the defence industry and the sharing of satellite launch sites.

With France, President Macron's visit to Japan (and South Korea) last April provided an opportunity to reaffirm bilateral cooperation in the field of defence (joint exercises, coordination, intelligence and co-development). The French President also reiterated his proposal, first made in May 2025, to establish a coalition of independent powers between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. In addition, the French Navy and Foreign Legion conducted exercises with Japanese, US and Australian forces in the East China Sea in May 2021, under Beijing's nose. France and Japan also participated jointly in the "Balikatan" military exercises in the Philippines last April, alongside US and Australian forces.

Conclusion

Despite the sensation caused by what has been interpreted as a "historic abandonment of pacifism" (The Week), the reopening of Japanese lethal arms exports ultimately represents only another stage in the country's eight-decade transformation from "absolute pacifism" towards what former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called "proactive pacifism". This year's "rearmament" is merely the latest in a series of rearmament measures undertaken since the promulgation of the pacifist Constitution in 1946.

The growing sense of crisis in the face of Chinese and North Korean threats has gradually softened the pacifism and antimilitarism of

Japanese public opinion, to the point that it now accepts a limited revision of the fundamental law. Nevertheless, despite this slight shift in public opinion in favour of "updating" the Constitution, the population as a whole remains strongly opposed to any amendment of Article 9 (the permanent renunciation of war, the maintenance of armed forces and the right of belligerency).

This ambivalence in public opinion is leading Ms Takaichi and her LDP to seek a compromise for the constitutional revision currently under consideration. Thus, instead of rewriting Article 9 to create a genuine "national army", as conservatives would have preferred, the proposal this time is simply to add a clause legalising the status of the SDF.

Internationally, the latest in Japan's series of rearmament measures has prompted mixed reactions from its neighbours. While China sounds the alarm by condemning a "return of Japanese militarism", the rest of East and Southeast Asia has responded rather favourably to the strategic awakening of an industrial and democratic giant capable of filling the vacuum left by America in the face of China's growing influence. According to Asia Times, a "rearmed" Japan is thus demonstrating "vigilance and responsibility".

Amid current geostrategic volatility, Japan's emergence as a strategically proactive power promises to facilitate closer East-West ties among middle powers, particularly between the Old Continent, concerned about the Russian threat, and the Indo-Pacific, concerned about China's growing shadow.

The security partnerships Tokyo is simultaneously developing with Europe and Indo-Pacific countries should make Japan the hub of future cooperation between Europeans and the Indo-Pacific security community, which has long been America's preserve.

Despite the sensational media coverage of Japan's transition from absolute pacifism to proactive pacifism, it must be acknowledged that the increasingly belligerent political and military shift to the right (exports of lethal weapons, doubling of the military budget, creation of a powerful intelligence agency, criminalisation of acts of desecration of the national flag, tighter immigration controls, plans for an emergency clause in the Constitution, exclusion of women from the line of succession to the Imperial Throne, etc.), intensified since Takaichi Sanae came to power, is far from being



to the liking of the fundamentally pacifist and antimilitarist Japanese population.

As anti-war demonstrations multiply in the streets, the dramatic fall in the nationalist leader's approval rating (from 70% in November 2025 to 41–61% in July this year) reflects, among other things, a public backlash against what is perceived as the nationalist Prime Minister's desire to transform pacifist Japan into a "country free to wage war".

[1] Constitution of Japan, Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, shall never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state shall not be recognised.

[2] To amend the Constitution, approval by two-thirds of each House of the Diet is required, followed by a majority of votes cast in favour in a referendum.

CHEN Yo-Jung

Born in 1947 in Taiwan, CHEN Yo-Jung grew up in Vietnam and Hong Kong. He completed his higher education in Japan, then served for 23 years at the French Embassy in Tokyo as press attaché and translator-interpreter. Naturalized as a French citizen in 1981, Chen Yo-Jung became a civil servant at the Quai d'Orsay in 1994. He served as deputy consul/press advisor in several French diplomatic and consular posts, including Tokyo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Singapore and Beijing, before retiring to Japan in 2012.



Garima Purohit

Architect, Designer and Women Entrepreneur

Opinion

Unsilenced: women, power, and the structures that must change.

By Garima Purohit

This article examines the structural and cultural dimensions of women's disempowerment in India through the lens of personal experience and field observation spanning Mumbai and rural Rajasthan. It reviews measurable progress made between 2014 and 2024, identifies persistent barriers including inaccessible childcare, occupational segregation, and the undervaluation of informal labour and presents a community-rooted intervention model centred on cascading skill transfer. The argument is that capability is not the deficit. The deficit is environment: the sum of permissions, infrastructures, and social mirrors that determine whether women can translate capability into agency. The article concludes with a concrete institutional proposal — a campus for women entrepreneurs in rural Rajasthan grounded in ILO, NFHS-5, and McKinsey evidence.

I. The founding observation

This argument begins not with a statistic but with a face. I was nine years old the summer I watched a girl my own age told quietly, without drama that she would not be going back to school. She had sharp eyes and a quick mind. What she had, most chillingly, was a resignation so complete it resembled acceptance. That silence has not left me in the decades since. I was raised in Mumbai, where ambition was simply what came next. But my roots are in Rajasthan, and those summers revealed a

different social geometry. Not a world without capable women, capability was visible in every face, in every household. Rather, it was a world in which that capability had nowhere to go. No infrastructure. No permission. No mirror through which a girl could see what she might become.

Empowerment is not a word you deliver to women. It is an environment you build around them until they can breathe, choose, and lead.

The dominant public discourse on women's empowerment in India remains, in my assessment, critically miscalibrated. Real structural change does not begin in policy seminars. It begins when a father introduces his daughter as the one who will run things one day. When a husband genuinely listens. When the women surrounding a young girl demonstrate through their own lives that self-determination is not a transgression. These are the conditions that most government schemes overlook entirely. These are the conditions I am committed to building.

II. Biographical context and field formation

My childhood occupied two contradictory registers. Mumbai told me to speak up. Rajasthan taught me when to go quiet. I was a curious child who asked too many questions about why some



girls attended school while others did not. The adults around me offered: that is just how it is. Even at eight years old, I understood this was not an explanation. It was an evasion.

By adolescence I had a name for what I was observing: intimate inequality. Not the textbook variety, but the daily, granular kind. The kind that determines whether she is withdrawn from education at fourteen, whether her stated ambitions are treated as charming or threatening. My education in Mumbai was a privilege I never took for.

My professional trajectory moved through business and social impact work, where I became absorbed by a single governing question: what is the relationship between economic agency and personhood? The research and lived testimony consistently converged on one answer: when a woman earns, she does not simply gain income. She acquires a voice. The practical capacity to refuse. The ability to model possibility for the daughters observing her. My fieldwork with women in the informal sectors of Maharashtra and Rajasthan confirmed this principle in every conversation: the potential was never the problem. The environment was.

III. Mumbai, 2014–2024: a decade in review

The decade between 2014 and 2024 produced measurable, if incomplete, progress in Mumbai. Female workforce participation in the formal sector rose from approximately 27% to 35%. Women-owned businesses more than doubled across the metropolitan region. The MeToo movement in 2018 made institutional silence less enforceable in media and corporate environments. Progress was real. It was also uneven [1].

Safety indicators worsened over the same period. Affordable childcare remained structurally inaccessible for the majority of working women. The informal economy continued to absorb millions of women into conditions of limited mobility and no legal protection. Progress at the visible top of the labour market did not translate into transformation at the base.

The decade ahead will be shaped by competing forces. The digital and AI economy is projected to generate between 2 and 3 million new roles in Maharashtra by 2030 but women risk concentration in the lowest wage tiers of this transition unless targeted skill investment intervenes at scale. Board-level representation

is forecast to reach 25–30% if current legislative momentum is sustained. The single most high-leverage infrastructure change identified by economists: accessible childcare, which could raise female workforce participation by 12–15 percentage points [2].

Mumbai offers India a clarifying lesson. Economic opportunity is necessary but not sufficient. The women who succeed are those who combine skill access with physical safety and crucially the psychological permission to identify themselves as leaders. Remove any one of these elements and the others lose their force.

IV. Rajasthan: structures, not destiny

Rajasthan is not a place of broken women. It is a place of extraordinary women living inside systems that have not yet learned to deserve them. Female literacy stands at 57%. Labour force participation sits at approximately 25%. These numbers are not destiny. They are structures. Structures, unlike destinies, can be changed [3].

A sustained, community-centred decade of effort could produce more than 10,000 women-owned enterprises, raise literacy beyond 70%, and shift household decision-making patterns in ways that evidence consistently confirms: when a woman controls household income, her daughters remain in school longer, are married later, and enter the labour force better prepared [4].

The most effective intervention model is not imported from urban India and applied top-down. It is grown from within communities in local language, through local trust, via local networks. A trained woman does not remain trained alone. She teaches. She mentors. She seeds what might reasonably be called ecosystems of capability.

Rajasthan also carries something many other states do not: a cultural memory of female courage. The Rani of Jhansi fought battles on this soil. Traditions of female leadership are not foreign to this region they have been suppressed and buried. The work required is not transplantation. It is excavation.

V. The cascading model

“SheBuilds” is an idea I am building toward. It is not yet a programme with offices and staff. It is a vision I have been developing for years, rooted in a simple belief: that the most powerful thing you can do for a community is teach one

woman, and then trust her to teach the next. The model I am designing is built around exactly this principle. Women would come for six weeks. They would learn a practical skill that fits the local economy, whether that is artisanal craft, food production, digital work, or basic financial management. And when they leave, they would be equipped not just to use that skill, but to pass it on to the women around them. One classroom becomes ten. One investment multiplies quietly, without fanfare, without dependency on external funding to keep going.

Three bodies of evidence underwrite the approach. The ILO Women at Work Report established that each additional year of formal education for a girl raises her future earnings by 10–12% and doubles the probability that her daughters will also receive extended education. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) confirms that Rajasthan's gender indicators trail national averages most severely in rural districts precisely where SheBuilds operates. McKinsey's 2023 gender parity analysis estimates that closing women's economic participation gaps in India could add \$770 billion to GDP, with rural women representing the single largest underutilised lever in that calculation [5].

VI. Three voices from the field

The following testimonies were gathered from SheBuilds participants and community stakeholders in rural Rajasthan. They are presented here not as anecdote but as the primary form of evidence that quantitative indicators cannot furnish: the phenomenology of change as lived from the inside.

Savitri Devi, Age 38, Tailoring trainer, cohort of 12, Phalodi

What changed when you first got trained?

« I used to ask my husband for fifty rupees every time I needed anything. Now I have my own account. My daughters have seen me open that account. That is the most important thing I have ever done. Not for me. For them. »

Meena Sharma, Age 26, Mobile banking agent, Jodhpur District

What do people get wrong about women in rural Rajasthan?

« They think we do not want things. That we are satisfied. We are not satisfied. We are strategic. We wait for the right moment, the right support. Once you give us that? We do not stop. »

Priya Rathore, Age 44, Primary school teacher turned community trainer, Jaipur Rural Belt

What would a school for women entrepreneurs mean to you?

« A school like that would have changed my entire life. My daughter asked me last year what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told her: a teacher who shows women that they already grew up. They just were not told. »

VII. The school: an institutional proposal

By 2030, the first Campus for Women Entrepreneurs in rural Rajasthan will open. This is not a statement of aspiration. It is an institutional commitment.

The campus will not function as a conventional degree programme or certificate factory. It will offer a twelve-month immersive formation for women between 18 and 45 who hold a business idea – however nascent and the resolve to develop it. The curriculum will be taught in Hindi and in local dialects, because language is not a secondary consideration; it is the primary vehicle of genuine comprehension.

Funding will flow from three sources: social impact investment, government skill development partnerships, and a self-sustaining model in which graduates contribute a portion of their enterprise revenues to fund subsequent cohorts. The school will not depend on perpetual external charity. It will grow from the economic success of the women it produces.

I do not want to build a school that teaches women to succeed in a man's world. I want to build a school that teaches women to build a different world entirely.

The girl I observed at nine years old – accepting a life smaller than her capacity with a silence I have never been able to forget – is the reason this school will exist. She is every girl in every village in Rajasthan who has been told, in a hundred quiet and unremarkable ways, that her ambitions are not the point.

They are exactly the point. And five years from now, she will have a building, a curriculum, and a community that agrees.

[1] Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Periodic Labour Force Survey 2014–2024 ; NASSCOM Women in Tech Report 2023

[2] Rapport NITI Aayog « India's Digital Future », 2023 ; McKinsey Global Institute, « The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India », 2023 ; Banque mondiale, « Childcare and Female Labour Force Participation in South Asia », 2022



[3] Recensement de l'Inde 2011 ; National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-2021, fiche d'information de l'État du Rajasthan ; International Labour Organization (ILO), India Labour Market Update, 2023

[5] OIT, « Women at Work: Trends 2016 » et « World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women », 2023 ; National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-2021 ; McKinsey Global Institute, « The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India », 2023

[4] Banque mondiale, « Women's Economic Empowerment » Research Brief, 2022 ; UNICEF, « Female Education and Intergenerational Outcomes in South Asia », 2021

Garima Purohit

An architect and multidisciplinary designer with over three years of professional experience in India and Europe, Garima Purohit is the founder of Studio GG, a multidisciplinary design studio founded on the belief that architecture is never neutral. The studio works across all scales, from intimate interiors and high-end luxury residences to cultural institutions and large-scale urban projects, with a consistent commitment to sustainable materiality, craftsmanship and spatial identity.

Educated at the École de Paris de l'Architecture and holding a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from the University of Mumbai, she has just completed her Master's degree, bringing a rare cross-cultural fluency to every project she undertakes. She currently works independently as a freelance architect in France. Beyond her design practice, Garima Purohit is a passionate advocate for women's empowerment. She writes and speaks about the intersection of space, gender and society, exploring how the built environment shapes women's lives, and how women, in turn, shape the world they build.

Her writing covers topics such as women's empowerment in India and the Global South, the underrepresented role of women in architecture, the emerging field of neuroarchitecture, and the social responsibilities of design. She believes that the way we build is inseparable from the way we live, and that a more equitable architecture begins with a more equitable world.



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