

# CHINA'S GLOBAL INITIATIVES: DOMINANCE THROUGH DIPLOMACY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

China's ambition and increasingly its capacity to dominate the world is one of the significant motivations driving its policies and postures. Deng Xiaoping's days of 'hide the capabilities and bide the time' have long been replaced by a visible and muscular manifestation of the 'China Dream' under Xi Jinping. The immense resources of a resurgent China have been put to work across domains to project an image of a nation retaking its rightful place in the world hierarchy and reclaiming its lost glory. Unrelenting efforts in the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains are being invested to create a favourable image of a country willing to aid, assist and accept without interfering. The carrot of conciliation, economic largesse, investment, trade and technology is occasionally mixed with the

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stick of military coercion, trade embargo, and tourism advisories to ensure unhindered propagation of interests and influence. One of the sour points that China has had with the world at large—more specifically with the developed world—is the international Rules-Based Order (RBO). It has expressed its displeasure with the way the ‘norms’ are floated and selectively applied by the self-appointed normative powers. Even as it challenges some of these through non-compliance—most notably in the South China Sea—it is floating in its own vision parallelly; global initiatives being one such. Of consequence and interest is the fact that it is finding resonance with many developing and underdeveloped countries.

### **MAJOR GLOBAL INITIATIVES BY CHINA**

China has launched several global initiatives in the last decade or so. The language is assuring, often condescending, but never hawkish. It talks of cooperative and collaborative effort to ensure peace, prosperity, growth and development of all the stakeholders. Through these, China aims to gradually alter the dynamics of the existing international system and create a new world order centred on China and serving China’s interests. There is the underlying and sacred promise to involve every country of the world, large and small, rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped. China’s vision for the future of the world is grandiose; it is also very compelling and attractive to the smaller countries. By resolving to take everyone along, listening to every voice, promising non-interference in internal affairs, allowing countries to choose the form of governance best suited to them, not imposing and judging but understanding and supporting, China’s vision appeals to the dispossessed and deprived and to those who have felt exploited, ignored, and used for far too long. By making ‘development’ the central theme of all engagement, sans any other ideological considerations, China’s appeal is alluring to the underdeveloped democracies and developed autocracies alike. While the extent of how much can be achieved remains uncertain and under question, the intent itself appears to have gone down well with much of the target audience, read the developing world. There is a long and ever-growing list of disgruntled and frustrated leaders, many of

whom find the Chinese proposition very amenable. The elephant in the room is the disregard of ideological moorings such as individual rights and freedom, religious tolerance, accommodation of diverse and contrarian views, to name a few. These might appear attractive to the classes, but the brunt of adverse outcomes which will invariably follow, will be borne by the masses. Development cannot be a substitute for human rights, freedom and liberty; therein lies the danger of the alternative order forwarded by China. Ironic as it may sound, it is also the plank on which China might succeed in pushing through its global governance reforms. Having tasted success with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), even though the complete fallout is yet to play out, China has launched four major initiatives in the last half decade. The Global Data Security Initiative was launched in 2020, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021 and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022 followed by the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) in 2023. While each of the initiatives is aimed at propagating Chinese ideas, ideals and interests, this article explores GDI, GSI, and GCI as norm-setting proposals and tools for world dominance.

### **GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE**

Proposed by Xi Jinping in September 2021, the GDI appears to draw from, and contribute to, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030. It involves China engaging with the UN in sponsoring small-scale development programmes in developing and Least Developed Countries (LDC) in areas such as poverty alleviation, health, sanitation, digital connectivity, among others. The programme offers China an opportunity to present development as the core and ultimate objective, not linked to such conditionalities as human rights and form of governance. The appeal of the initiative can be judged by the numbers; over 70 countries have already joined the GDI, with China committing upwards of 1,00,000 training opportunities and sponsoring over 50 projects.<sup>1</sup> As per some reports, many of the GDI projects are completed, and many others have been included. China has instituted a UN backed group of friends of GDI, a collection

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1. Elizabeth Economy, "China's Alternative Order and What America Should Learn from It," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 103, no. 3, 2024, p. 15.

of over 60 countries, for facilitating policy coherence, knowledge sharing and project implementation.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, while the GDI in itself is not a completely new proposal—China piggy-riding on an existing UN programme—it has the effect of providing China with a significant degree of leverage to push forward its agenda in the partner countries. Beijing has always believed in a close link between development and security. Consequently, it views the GDI as the key to shaping a favourable external environment for China's rise.<sup>3</sup> One of the core themes mentioned in the Concept Paper on GDI is to "prioritise development", calling development the master key to all problems and the prerequisite for safeguarding world peace and protecting and promoting human rights.<sup>4</sup> However, the argument falls flat when one considers China's position and approach to Tibet, Taiwan and the South China Sea (SCS).

### GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

Xi Jinping launched the GSI in April 2022 during a speech at the Boao Forum for Asia. The GSI aims at promoting "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" and prioritising "dialogue over confrontation, partnership over alliances, and a win-win" for all to replace what China refers to as the "zero-sum game".<sup>5</sup> Xi Jinping has appealed to countries to "reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation." While China claims to contribute its "Chinese wisdom and Chinese

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2. Ekman Alice "China's Global Security Initiative: When the Process Matters More than the Content", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief No. 5, p. 2, March 2023, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_5\\_China%27s%20Global%20Security%20Initiative.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_5_China%27s%20Global%20Security%20Initiative.pdf). Accessed on June 10, 2025.
  3. Manoj Kewalramani, "China's Vision for a New World Order: GDI, GSI, GCI," Takshashila Institution, Takshashila Discussion Slide Doc. Available at: <https://takshashila.org.in/research/takshashila-slidedoc-chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order-gdi-gsi-amp-gci>. Accessed on March 29, 2025.
  4. Government of PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Global Development Initiative—Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development (Concept Paper)," Circulated on September 21, 2021 during the High-level Week of the 76th Session of UN General Assembly. Available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI\\_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf). Accessed June 21, 2025.
  5. Government of PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," February 21, 2023. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530\\_11343274.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11343274.html). Accessed on June 10, 2025.

solutions” to contribute to world peace and tranquillity and to resolve the security challenges through the GSI, it fails to apply the same yardstick when it comes to its security issues with neighbours, most notably in the South China Sea but elsewhere too. China has proposed six commitments pertaining to core concepts and principles and encourages countries to coordinate and cooperate in at least twenty diverse areas using platforms and mechanisms generally centred around China. The document itself is fairly wide-ranging and touches upon nearly every aspect of global governance while aiming to attain relevance and acceptance through multiple references to the UN and its various bodies. China claims support from over 100 entities for the GSI.

### **GLOBAL CIVILISATION INITIATIVE**

Xi Jinping articulated the GCI on March 15, 2023, during a meeting between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and World Political Parties. While speaking at the meeting, Xi called for respect for the diversity of civilisations, advocating the common values of humanity, highly valuing the inheritance and innovation of civilisations, and jointly advocating robust international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Under the GCI, China is advancing the idea that countries with different civilisations and levels of economic development will have different models for their growth, development and prosperity. No one model was superior to another, and no country, therefore, had any right to thrust its conceptions of democracy and human rights on others with a differing world view and civilisational moorings. Currently, only a few countries have given public support to the GCI, but the enormous financial leverage that China commands will induce many more in the days to come. The GCI underpins China’s development-centric alternative world order, where diverse development paths and approaches are respected and included, and peripheral agendas like human rights and democracy are left to the internal governance mechanism of the

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6. Bin Liu, “Xi Urges Political Parties to Steer Course for Modernization, Proposes Global Civilization Initiative”, *Xinhua News*, March 16, 2023, [https://www.idpc.gov.cn/ztwy/hytl/gdheng/results/202303/t20230316\\_151401.html](https://www.idpc.gov.cn/ztwy/hytl/gdheng/results/202303/t20230316_151401.html). Accessed on June 21, 2025.

country concerned. There are no external pressures or allurements to adhere to liberal democratic principles or any other ideology, for that matter.

### **ATTEMPTS AT ALTERNATIVE ORDER**

China seeks to replace the international rules-based order (RBO) with development-oriented global governance. Alongside, it aims to replace the security umbrella provided by the USA with the notion of common, comprehensive, collective, and indivisible security. It professes to discard the Cold War mentality and the zero-sum approach. China is a late entrant to the global order and financial system, but has quickly integrated and has done so reasonably well. Having benefitted immensely from the existing order on the economic front and with rising power across military, diplomatic and technological domains, it now feels empowered and entitled to shape its response, the overriding consideration being its strategic interest and long-term vision. The response varies from positive cooperation, neutral observation, critical participation, reluctant compliance, outright rejection, or domineering intervention. The global initiatives provide an alternative to the existing world order; progressive yet revisionist, inclusive though unilateral, and mostly non-specific. At their core, the initiatives attempt to replace most of what the US and Europe, mostly the US, have imposed since World War II. The GSI, for instance, is an attempt to challenge, and eventually replace, the largely US-led and Europe-supported “allies and partners” encouraged system of treaties, alliances, blocs and what China prefers to repeatedly refer to as “cliques”. While the current world order may have its ills as its strengths, China has great motivation arising out of ideological compulsions, to replace it.

The current international order largely stands for a liberal outlook and aims to spread democracy, human rights, individualism, freedom of thought and expression, free enterprise, etc., with associated aspects of erosion of state control and state authority. The latter are dear to China and crucial for the Party's survival. China's biggest motivation is, therefore, anchored in curtailing and containing the spread of liberal values. In a commentary on the GDI, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims not to attach

any “political conditions” to South-South cooperation.<sup>7</sup> However, the reality belies this assertion. Restricting tourism and trade with the Philippines and Australia, and the unique case of Hambantota in Sri Lanka are all shining examples of the primacy of geostrategic interests over developmental cooperation with partners.

Gradually at first but with increasing vigour of late, China is injecting its alternative world order. It rejected the arbitration ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the SCS, declaring it “null and void” with “no binding force”. Instead, China is encouraging the affected countries to follow the provisions laid down in the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone”, promulgated in February 1992. An alternative to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is, thus, sought to be imposed. There are innumerable references to the UN in the concept papers and other declarations and documents concerning the Chinese initiatives. China well understands that it can’t force itself on its own as yet. It needs the support of the UN umbrella, and, at the same time, it would be difficult for other challengers to negate UN intervention without inviting criticism from the developing world. The point to note is that even as China professes the primacy of the UN, it will likely use the UN platform not for conciliation or resolution but to assert itself in bilateral and multilateral groupings and expand its influence.

### **ANALYSIS OF CHINA’S INITIATIVES**

Major features of Chinese global initiatives include sovereign equality of nations, non-interference in internal affairs, right to choose developmental path, multi-culturism, multi-polarity, concept of indivisible security, anti-sanctions stand, to name a few important ones. Some of these translate into the least priority for human rights and resultantly, non-interference on this account. This is very appealing to autocracies, monarchies, most developing nations and quasi-democracies. However, its value on the moral

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7. “Three Years on, China-proposed Global Development Initiative Gathers Momentum for Speeding up Modernization”, The 2024 Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, [https://2024focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zpfb\\_1/202409/t20240924\\_11495373.htm](https://2024focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zpfb_1/202409/t20240924_11495373.htm). Accessed on June 21, 2025.

compass is debatable. Secondly, even as China puts forward its concept papers and proposals, there are no specifics outside of the BRI and the GDI. For all its condemnation of the system of blocs and alliances, no concrete alternatives are presented. “Community of shared future” makes little sense unless the form and shape of that community is spelt out. Thirdly, multilateralism finds innumerable mentions in the documents. It is an irony that China seeks to build “true multilateralism” through unilaterally designed initiatives.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, China makes no bones about its preference for resolving disputes bilaterally, even though the matter may involve multiple countries concurrently, an example being its contested claims in the SCS. Interpretation of multilateralism appears to be governed by convenience and national interests. Fourthly, China repeatedly alludes to achieving democracy, the rule of law and human rights through development. While there is no discernible link between these, the Chinese concept of democracy and rule of law, although not specified explicitly, itself appears to be at drastic variance with that of the rest of the world. Human rights in regular understanding are taken to mean civil and political rights with such features as the right to freedom, speech, liberty, etc. China often looks at human rights as the right to development, economic rights, and social and cultural rights. This fundamental difference in interpretation and understanding of these terms is irreconcilable.

One of the GSI concepts aimed at minimising conflicts is to “stay committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries”.<sup>9</sup> Most of the territorial conflicts, including those involving China, do not claim to trace their origin to disrespect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other party, but rather because there are differing perceptions informed by the historical accounts and current understanding of these legacy issues. This

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8. Przemyslaw Ciborek, “China’s Global Initiatives: Challenges and Prospects, New Chinese Initiatives for a Changing Global Initiative”, p. 103, Third International Academic Conference—Dialogues on China 2023, Belgrade. Published by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, 25, Makedonska St. 11000, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia.
  9. Government of PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” February 21, 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530\\_11343274.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11343274.html). Accessed on June 10, 2025.

critical aspect is ignored by the GSI. Initiatives appear to be governed and framed more by a desire to remain in the good standing of all but the most powerful countries through proposing utopian ideas, but no definitive process for implementation. It has rightly been noted by some scholars that the terms on which the GSI is built are so broad as to render the document non-serious.<sup>10</sup> Linking security to “morality, justice and right ideas”, the GSI proposes to “resolve conflicts through development and eliminating the breeding ground for insecurity”.<sup>11</sup> Much like human rights, security is also sought to be connected to development. However, issues related to the external security of nations cannot be addressed through development alone.

There is hypocrisy in China’s attitude. Its displayed behaviour does not align with the words expressed in the Global Initiatives. While *realpolitik* will invariably make it near impossible to perfectly practice what one preaches, the contrast is rather huge in China’s case. For instance, China professes in its “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance” that expertise in the cyber domain should not be employed to create new vistas for geopolitical contest.<sup>12</sup> This, while engaging in cyber espionage and related disruptions in target countries. Elsewhere in the same proposal, China undertakes to “work with all countries to uphold the maritime order based on international law...equality, mutual benefit and mutual respect” and “safeguard maritime peace and tranquillity and waterway security”. These avowed intentions have not translated into corresponding action in the SCS. On the contrary, China has sought to impose its will and interpretation at all costs, including violent application of force on the other littorals.

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10. Ekman Alice “China’s Global Security Initiative: When the Process Matters More Than the Content”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief No. 5 (March 2023), [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_5\\_China%27s%20Global%20Security%20Initiative.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_5_China%27s%20Global%20Security%20Initiative.pdf). Accessed on June 10, 2025.

11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of PRC (2023), *The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper*, February 21, 2023.

12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of PRC, “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance”, Issued September 13, 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531\\_11367498.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html). Accessed on May 30, 2025.

## DOMINANCE THROUGH DIPLOMACY

While there are many infirmities in the initiatives analysed in the paper the one reason China is pushing ahead with them is the desire for dominance. The US remains the most formidable challenge to China's ambitions of global dominance. Even as China builds its hard power—both military and economic—it continues to explore additional and alternative mechanisms to establish a balance of power vis-à-vis the US. One such is the bouquet of Global Initiatives. Realising the futility of engaging with the developed world, China has so constructed the structure that almost every clause of the Initiatives addresses the core sensibilities and appeals to the emotional element of the developing countries, clearly targeting them. They hardly include provisions for addressing the concerns of the whole world, a ploy at garnering the majority vote and not attempting unanimity. The desire to dominate the Global South through an alternative order is evident. Proposals condemning “unilateral sanctions”<sup>13</sup> have great appeal for the sanctioned countries and naturally create a magnetic pull towards China. Through enunciation of the Global Initiatives, China is pursuing long-term objectives with direct benefit to its aspirations for global supremacy. To create an alternative security architecture centred on China and global institutions is the obvious one. Not so obvious but equally compelling is the desire to present itself as a successful form of governance and political system, especially targeted at the developing countries.<sup>14</sup>

The stated aim of the GDI is to “maximise the synergy between the 2030 Agenda and initiatives such as the BRI, Agenda 2063 of the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the Initiative on Partnership for Africa's Development”.<sup>15</sup> China also advocates “provision of sufficient, predictable and sustainable financial assistance to the African Union (AU) for it to carry out autonomous peacekeeping operations.”<sup>16</sup> The proposals appear not

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13. n. 11.

14. n. 12.

15. Global Development Initiative—Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development (Concept Paper). Circulated on September 21, 2021 at UN General Assembly, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI\\_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf). Accessed on June 21, 2025.

16. n. 11.

only good-intentioned but pragmatic and are bound to be much appreciated by the African nations. Quite evidently, China's objective is to target the African nations with the GDI and BRI, the intent being a greater space and influence in the resource-rich continent. Africa can well serve both as a source of raw materials and a market for finished goods. It is not by oversight that Africa finds 14 mentions in the GSI concept paper, more than any other region and only one less than China.

While identifying the platforms and mechanisms of cooperation under the rubric of the GSI, the concept paper refers to only China-led and China-dominated groupings, an attempt at highlighting and projecting its own way of thinking and serving its own agenda. China moved to the number two position on the GDP chart some time in the year 2010. The BRI was launched within three years of that. The Global Initiatives have been offered a decade later. If the BRI was meant to test the waters for a possible change in the world order, the Initiatives are the refined result of that test and are meant to herald the arrival of a new order centred around China.

## **CONCLUSION**

While China has adopted a multi-pronged approach to fulfil its global ambitions, within the diplomatic domain, its desire for dominance and creation of an alternative world order finds its most vibrant manifestation in the Global Initiatives. Each of these is aimed to project China as a responsible and capable nation equipped with the necessary means and tools to provide efficient global governance. The three Initiatives interest different countries in different measure. In broad terms, the GDI, because of its financial appeal, has been accepted by many countries. The GCI will find takers for many, if not all, of its provisions. But the GSI will generate significant levels of reservation and for good reason. China's attempt at garnering influence and challenging the current order hinges on acceptance of the GSI, a fact not lost on many countries. For the many infirmities and clear cases of poorly considered viewpoints, the Global Initiatives are Chinese-led and China-serving mechanisms. The biggest threat is to US hegemony and the RBO centred around the US. Consequently, the pushback

has started in earnest. Only time will tell whether China's decision to shed Deng's 24-character strategy was flawed, at least in its timing. Was the attempt to showcase the capabilities and announce the arrival a little premature? The unfolding events will provide the answer sooner than later.