

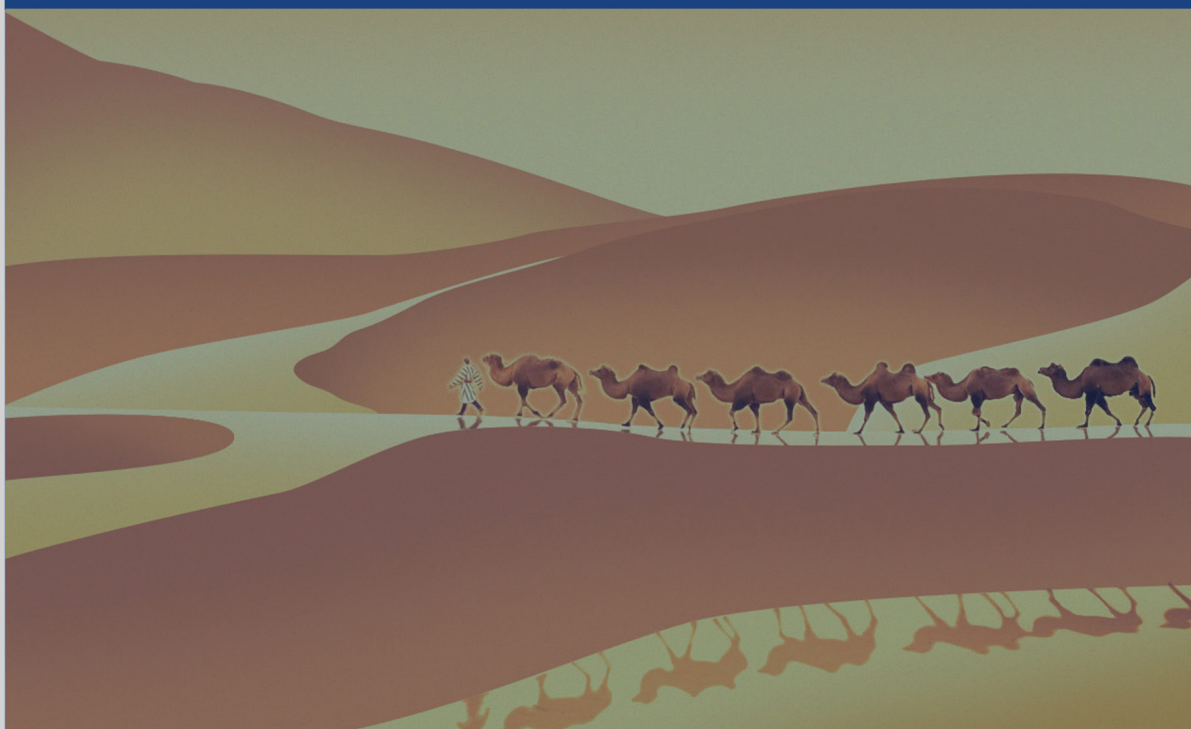
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**A New Model for a Multipolar World**  
**China's Global Initiatives**



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# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Multipolarity: The Quest for Commonality in a World of Difference

Warwick Powell



Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Australia; the author of *China, Trust and Digital Supply Chains*. *Dynamics of a Zero Trust World*.

## The Myths and Realities of Unipolarity

It is now clear that today, globally, we are at the end of the “End of History” moment. Francis Fukuyama made the victorious claim in 1991 that the dismantling of the Soviet Union marked the “End of History.” He meant by this a Hegelian notion that History with a capital “H”—as the unfolding of progress—had concluded, with the ideas that America embodied (or claimed to embody), reaching their apogee. Liberalism (the big “L” variety), as a normative political credo emphasizing the “freedom of individuals” and the triumph of “free markets,” trumped all before it and confirmed the Euro-Atlantic idea that Liberalism was both for the Civilized and tantamount to Human Civilization itself.

This was, however, a *myth*; albeit a necessary one that mollified the masses. American unipolarity and its attendant mythologies were not the apotheosis of Human development after all. Indeed, History not only didn’t end, it barely rested. Riding what some have described as the “sugar high of unipolarity,” since 1990 the United States of America embarked on three decades of escalation in military interventions across the globe. In the name of one cause or another, the U.S. pursued a posture of “kinetic diplomacy” first, which consolidated its character as a nation that is “addicted to military intervention,” as Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi in their *Dying by the Sword: The Militarization of American Foreign Policy*, recently concluded.

This addiction saw the U.S. embark on an array of military adventures, leaving a legacy of almost one million direct war deaths in American wars post-2001 in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere as of March 2023, and up to 4.6 million indirect deaths as of May 2023, according to the Costs of War

project at Brown University. The wars waged have generally left the places worse off than before the interventions. Unsurprisingly, many across the world would not sit still and accept this as the apotheosis of human possibilities. American millenarian zealotry wasn't universally embraced, even as it spoke strongly to a domestic audience drunk on the mythologies of American Exceptionalism. The United States' transatlantic allies weren't always thrilled, but could do little about it aside from periodic complaints of the need for European "strategic autonomy." Through NATO, the U.S. always held the aces when it came to Western European subordination. As for America's Asian friends, the sub-imperial powers, as Clinton Fernandes dubbed Australia, simply hoped that the unipolar moment would last forever.

## Unipolarity and Colonialism

The end of American unipolarity is actually an end of two intertwined historical threads; one conjunctural—a matter of decades in gestation, the other centuries in duration—or as Fernand Braudel would say, *the longue durée*. The conjunctural closure brings to an end a relatively recent malevolent U.S.-driven neocon evangelism propped up by a supine and supercilious bunch of transatlantic subordinate allies and Pacific sub-imperial acolytes. As for the long waves, I speak of the nearing of an end to a half millennium of European-cum-American global colonialism.

When Fukuyama spoke of the "End of History," his tone was entirely Hegelian. Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, presented history as the development of individualism. The development of individualism marked the distinction between the modern peoples (of Western Europe) and the others whose social cultures were characterized by a "collectivism" or "communalism." Individualism was the precondition for the emergence of civilization, marked by individual rationality—a capacity for reflective thought and action—and autonomy. The uncivilized, by way of contrast, were barbaric and savage. These contrasts can be traced back at least to Immanuel Kant's "Idea for a Universal History" (1784) and the Enlightenment more generally.

John Locke famously distinguished between the habits of Western and non-Western peoples in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). For the former, the habits involved the ability to pause for reflection before action. For the non-Westerns, however, they were characterized by impulsive action,

irrationality, and a herd mentality. In Locke's schema, the Westerner had the ability to be both a subject that could develop a knowledge of themselves and others, which was necessary for both individual self-government and for non-despotic forms of collective government. However, the savages could not know themselves, *ergo* they could not govern themselves as free individuals.

Unsurprisingly, colonial conquerors developed governmental strategies that doubted the ability of the barbaric natives to govern themselves. Lord Cromer, for example, drew from his experiences as Consul General in the government of Egypt, advocating a form of indirect rule in *The Government of Subject Races* (1908). He argued that a form of externally imposed despotic rule was necessary in the early stages of leading these races toward self-government. James Balfour and other liberals at the time were similarly concerned that the populations of the colonies would not be able to govern themselves in the absence of a despotic colonial government.

John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential British Liberal thinkers and an experienced colonial administrator (he worked most of his life for the East India Company) claimed in *On Liberty* (1859) that, "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a *civilized community*, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good... is not a sufficient warrant." The key point in this passage is that liberty is a right only to those that belong to a "civilized community." In the same treatise, he would, like Locke, argue that uncivilized populations could not be trusted with this right because they did not have the mental freedom and individuality required to exercise self-governance properly.

He thus believed the less advanced people of the British Empire "must be governed by the dominant country, or by persons delegated for that purpose by it. This mode of government is legitimate as any other if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement." C. L. Temple advanced a similar theme. He had been an administrator in Nigeria, insisting that the Africans could only be freed from native institutions if "he becomes at once like a kite without a tail." Alexis de Tocqueville—another famous figure in the Liberal tradition—was readily implicated in French rule in Algeria as Jennifer Pitts showed in her 2000 article in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*.

Meanwhile, the American settlers massacred the native peoples in numbers that have led scholars to describe it as genocide. David Stannard, in his *American*

*Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, has described as “the worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed,” the number of deaths caused by the invasion and conquest of the lands of the Western hemisphere by Europeans and their descendants post 1492. In India, according to Shubhra Chakrabarti and Utsa Patnaik’s 2017 study, the British would plunder an estimated \$45 trillion between 1765 and 1938, and kill 100 million Indians between 1880 and 1920. African nations were plunged into slavery, which in due course also animated the very foundations of American capitalism, as vividly shown by Edward Baptist in his *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. The marks of European colonialism across Asia—from China through to Southeast Asia, are still evident today.

In reality, Liberalism in practice was rarely committed to the promotion of freedom as a principle. Liberalism’s colonialist legacy is clear, and consequently, critics like Ramachandra Guha and Edward Said excoriated the Liberal fantasy for its hypocrisy. The conceptual presuppositions and *spirit* that underpinned the romance of colonial conquest and rule are little different from those that mobilize and rationalize America’s more contemporary addiction to military intervention. If colonialism formally ended in the 1950s and 1960s, the American unipolar moment gave it another lease of life. Vestiges remain across the world, much of it now reinforced through the rapacious lending practices of the post-WWII financial institutions of the IMF and World Bank that turned developing countries into loan addicts. And of course, we have the persistence of military intervention as the foundational *modus operandi* of the so-called “rules-based international order,” highlighting the reality that the promise of post-war Liberalism was accompanied by the brutal reality of illiberal hypocrisy, as described by Patrick Porter in his *The False Promise of Liberal Order* and by John Mearsheimer’s 2019 paper “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order” in the journal *International Security*.

As for the general disposition, look no further than the EU’s most senior diplomat, Josep Borrell, who said in October 2022 that, “Europe is a garden; we have built a garden... [but] the rest of the world is not exactly a garden; the rest of the world—most of the rest of the world—is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden; and the gardeners should take care of it.”

## A World of Civilizations

The end of the American unipolar moment is often portrayed as a question of “great powers” rivalry. Graham Allison asks whether a Thucydides Trap can be avoided. For Mearsheimer, unipolarity ended around 2017 and the world is now multipolar, with three main powers. I suggest, however, that it’s more than a mere “changing of the guard.” Rather, as Western Liberalism struggles under the weight of its own hypocrisy and autoimmune crises, such as international sanctions and the increasingly illiberal practices of trade restrictions, and the growing domestic practices of illiberal policing in both the real and digital realms, we stand on the cusp of finally closing the chapter on over 500 years of colonialism—as a mode of thinking about human history, governmental practice, economic plundering, and cultural expropriation.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has advanced a number of high-level initiatives, including the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), focused on framing the possibilities of a new global settlement. Colonialism, in the name of Liberalism, necessitated the amelioration of difference; after all, there could only be one valid version of civilization. Today’s alternative couldn’t be clearer. Xi’s GCI is part of a wider multilateral dialogue that is taking place through words and deeds, reflecting an ethos of *finding commonality whilst recognizing differences*. Here, *multipolarity* at once describes emerging patterns as well as establishes something of a normative frame to design ongoing possibilities.

Xi’s framework has two explicit anchors: firstly, recognition and acceptance of human diversity across time and space and seeing it as a source of human strength, and secondly, embedding this diversity within a governance architecture at the heart of which are nation states, whose relations with each other are grounded in ideas of territorial sovereignty and non-interference that have a Westphalian resonance. It’s also clear that Xi—and others—draw from a rich pre-colonial history of cross-national and cross-civilization interaction, to inspire the concrete measures taking place that are contributing to the fabric of contemporary multipolarity.

Trade has been foundational to the interaction of societies throughout the ages. Initiatives like the Belt and Road seek to inject additional verve into cross-border trade through the development of critical and necessary infrastructure for trade to take place. It’s not, however, just the BRI. New connections are being formed that open up trade frontiers including the International North-South

Transport Corridor, a multimodal network that moves freight between India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and ultimately to Europe. Türkiye is revitalizing the entrepôt status of modern-day Constantinople (Istanbul) as a pivotal link in Eurasian trade interconnectivity. Saudi Arabia, amongst other Gulf States, is investing heavily in the infrastructure needed to become a hub for the digital economy, linking the region with North Africa and beyond.

The ASEAN-initiated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement is the world's largest free trade agreement, involving ASEAN's 10 member states and China, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Pan-Asian transport infrastructure continues to develop, reducing time and costs. The Kunming-Singapore railway, when it is completed, will link China to Thailand, with routes via Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Marine linkages through southeast Asia to ports around the Indian Ocean recall the cross-civilization interactions of past centuries that took place between the Persian, Indian, and Chinese worlds. Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 1500s followed by other European colonial powers, these commercial routes were anchored in decentered relations between different civilizational and city-port states that recognized the mutual benefits of trade. The nations and entrepôt governors were able to modulate the necessary political balances to keep trade flows happening, rarely seeking to impose their own "versions of the world" onto others. These kinds of "open orders" of 15<sup>th</sup>-century decentered hegemony, described by Manjeet Pardesi in his recent study on 15<sup>th</sup>-century Melaka, point the way to the possibilities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century multipolarity.

Physical infrastructure, like transportation, communication, and energy systems, are coupled with the intangible regimes of data governance that can support the intensification of cross-border flows of goods and services. The digitalization of payments, coupled with blockchain technologies, creates the means by which the exchange of value can take place in dependable ways. The People's Bank of China has been working with the Bank of International Settlements Innovation Hub Hong Kong Centre, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, the Bank of Thailand, and the Central Bank of UAE on a digitalized blockchain-enabled cross-border platform – Project mBridge - which has successfully trialed over \$150m of payments in October 2022. In some regards, as I have argued at length in my book, the nature of blockchains embodies some of the design features of contemporary multipolarity by enabling a multitude of participants to interact by utilizing a common infrastructure—indeed, being part of the operations and maintenance of the infrastructure to ensure systemic integrity—whilst maintaining their own



autonomy. Currency multipolarity and national currency trade settlements are growing and reflect the decentered nature of the emergent multipolar world. Countries of southeast Asia are also forging ahead with cross-border digital payment convenience through the harmonization of multinational QR code payment systems. An African national currencies payments network is emerging, and South American nations are having similar conversations, not to mention talk of a BRICS currency. The proliferation of open-source software standards and their adoption by some major technology firms create the conditions for more diverse and inclusive participation within a common framework.

Colonialism and Enlightenment Liberalism have run out of puff, hastened by the demise of its most recent progeny, American unipolarity. The old is dying. The new remains to be fully formed. For Antonio Gramsci, a great variety of “morbid symptoms appear” in this interregnum. The beneficiaries of colonialism, old and new, are rallying. The Gardeners are hanging on for grim death. Those from Borrell’s jungle can, however, see an alternative. China’s heft has made it possible. The time for the Global South has come to be part of creating a decentered world that finds commonality as humans on a shared planet, whilst celebrating and accepting the diversity that defines the human condition.

# The Wisdom Behind China's Global Initiatives

## Development, Security & Harmony

Paul Wang



Professor of International Law and International Relations at the Shi Liang School of Law, Changzhou University

In his latest book "*Leadership - Six Studies in World Strategy*," Dr. Henry Kissinger has expounded his views on statecraft. He writes that any society, whatever its political system, is perpetually in transit between a past memory and a future vision since both are the inspiring forces of evolution. "Along this route, therefore, leadership is always indispensable."<sup>1</sup>

For Kissinger, it is self-evident that grand decisions must be made rationally, mutual trust should be earned internally and externally, and a forward path be proposed feasibly. Conversely, policy can drift and nations may court growing uncertainties or even disaster without seasoned leadership. China is no exception.

As one of the ancient nations of the world, China is inspired by its splendid civilization, while also aspiring to national development and rejuvenation. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China has achieved the mission of alleviating hundreds of millions of its population from poverty and made great progress in the fields of economics, education, and environment. China is now more confident than ever as it takes a key role at the "center of the world stage." No wonder, the leadership of the CPC has been committed to reconstructing China from a poor and backward country to a uniquely dynamic and prosperous country.

<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Leadership - Six Studies in World Strategy* (NY: Penguin, 2022), p. 1.

China is now the world's second-largest economy and a leading trade power. President Xi Jinping has reiterated that the development of China cannot be isolated from the world, and a prosperous China benefits worldwide development. Thus, China has earnestly pursued a peaceful rise harnessing the wisdom of Chinese statecraft while firmly rejecting the notion that China's rising is doomed to conflict with other major countries of the world.

## Development is the key

Development is the eternal pursuit of human society, and the Chinese government remains committed to national reconstruction and development by adapting to priority variances. In 2021, President Xi announced the Global Development Initiative (GDI) at the 76<sup>th</sup> session of UN General Assembly, which echoed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as the mission of current international development cooperation. The achievement of China's campaign against poverty not only signifies the triumph of human resilience, but also provides invaluable insights into the effective practice of poverty reduction strategies made by China's leaders. As U.S. economist Jeffrey Frieden observed, China has grown rapidly for over 30 years and elevated living standards far beyond those of 1980.<sup>2</sup>

The most noteworthy concepts and principles of the GDI are identified with China's efforts to "focus on development, prioritize development cooperation in global macro-policy coordination, and tackle outstanding problems and challenges in national governance through development."<sup>3</sup> First, as development is seen as the key to maintaining social stability and world peace, China has engineered feasible economic growth in line with the "betterment of people's well-being." In the Chinese context, the concept of "people-centered," which refers to "enhancing people's livelihood to hold a sense of happiness, gain and security," is also the genuine protection of human rights. Second, in a globalized world, economic advancement ought to fit well with all countries and, in particular, the Global South. Third, in the long run, world development follows the innate laws of the ecosystem, e.g., assurance of both development and environmental protection. According to the GDI, since human and nature form a community of life,

2 Jeffrey Frieden, David Lake, Kenneth Schultz, *World Politics – Interests, Interactions & Institutions* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 332.

3 "Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative 2023" (Beijing: Center for International Knowledge on Development, 2023), p. 1.

it is significant for the international community to advance sustainable social-economic development symbiotically.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, China has adopted technological innovation as the primary driving force for development in the new era, which also stabilizes economic recovery, accelerates global development, and promotes the tangible growth of the Global South. Moreover, China upholds multilateralism and supports the UN in playing a coordinating role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and has also taken an “action-oriented” approach to global developmental models. In the past year, the GDI has forged international consensus on jointly promoting development and encouraged the international community to synergize the 2030 Agenda, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Agenda 2063 of the African Union.<sup>5</sup> Also, China has steadily pushed for advancing North-South dialogues, deepening South-South synergies, and enhancing the role and voice of emerging markets and developing countries in global governance.

## Security is the prerequisite

Universal security is the prerequisite for global development due to the uneven growth among regions and significant disparities between the Global North and Global South. China’s President Xi first proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022 during his address at the Boao Forum. The GSI vision is to provide security for all countries via “six commitments” that cover common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security and the conventional security concepts such as respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. The six commitments are an organic entirety of dialectical unity, with a view of addressing the complex and intertwined security challenges with a win-win mindset.<sup>6</sup>

As security inherently involves traditional and non-traditional concerns, China has urged that the purposes and principles of the UN Charter be respected and the legitimate security concerns of all countries be genuinely addressed. With the ongoing Ukraine Crisis and other crises and disputes occurring globally, China has urged all concerned

4 Ibid. pp. 27-28.

5 Ibid. pp. 39-40.

6 “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper” (Peking University: Institute for Global Cooperation & Understanding, 2023).

parties that peaceful settlement of disputes between countries through dialogue is elemental. Some scholars have argued that the core concepts and principles of the GSI are the mainstay of China's foreign policy since the 1950s. However, China's novel approach was the proposal to all countries to uphold the principle of indivisible security and building of a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture. The GSI defines the new architecture as "the legitimate and reasonable security concerns of all countries being taken seriously and addressed properly... Any country, while pursuing its own security, should take into account the reasonable security concerns of others."<sup>7</sup>

The GSI covers and extends the general spirit of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence adopted 70 years ago to make a critical contribution to the world in the new era. While the international community is faced with deficits in peace, development, security, and governance, the GSI works in tandem with the BRI and the GDI to form part of China's overarching vision and strategy of creating public goods to build a community with a shared future for humanity. The GSI aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promote durable peace and development in the world.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in foreign affairs where sovereign states interact in terms of respective vital interests, security of one side cannot come at the expense of the security of others.

The benefits of the GDI and the GSI have been echoed by the Global South and particularly by African countries. Two sessions of the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum involving about 50 African states were held in 2022. China and its African partners agreed to move towards a promising vision of jointly building a security community. Alongside the consensus on broad principles and procedures with African partners, the GSI clearly details aid and assistance from China in areas of strategic communication, equipment and technology cooperation, joint maritime training exercises, exchange in professional fields, and other technical and financial assistance to counter terrorism and other threats in Africa. For example, some African countries have already received assistance from China in building local highways, railways, ports, dams, and power stations. As such, the world has witnessed

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Asif Noor, "Initiative offers path to shared prosperity," *China Daily*, 2023-04-11

China enacting the responsible provision to Africa and other regions of feasible supports to their urgent needs.

## Harmony is the future

China and many other countries, including those of the Global South, have long aspired for peace and its practical benefits. However, the U.S.-led West has pushed for a continuing unilateral world order based on hegemony and bloc confrontation, which contradicts the spirit of the multipolar world order centered on the role of the UN. In the 1990s, Samuel Huntington argued that with great power conflicts waning in the post-Cold War world, "interstate conflicts would reemerge focusing on culture as a source of conflict."<sup>9</sup> Yet, Huntington's vision of the clash of civilizations suffered from his oversimplification of world trends. Conversely, China has opined that the value of diversity in civilization is the source of human progress. By connecting diverse cultures and nation-states, the BRI has brought China ever closer to over 70 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

In 2023, President Xi unveiled the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) during a gathering of political parties from around the world. Along with the GDI and the GSI, the GCI forms a comprehensive approach to promote world development, security, and harmony. President Xi's call for a global network of inter-civilizational dialogue and cooperation aligns with his vision of promoting people-to-people exchanges and global cooperation. First, the GCI aims to build on the inherent strengths of China. The initiative seeks to foster deep interactions between civilizations across the globe, evolve common values and share the goals of peace and development. By cementing the strength of a new type of state-to-state relations, China is committed to enlarging global partnerships and building a new type of international relations that prioritize common interests.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the GCI reflects China's global commitment to its peaceful rise, harmonious coexistence, and cultural tolerance. With the rise of its comprehensive global strength, China has vowed to responsibly foster global development, security, and harmony. President Xi's remarks

9 Joseph Nye, Jr., "Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History," (Peking University Press, 2005): 248.

10 Asif Noor, "Initiative offers path to shared prosperity," *China Daily*, 2023-04-1

reflect the common values of human civilizations, including democracy, equity, justice, and freedom, in pursuit of peaceful development. In this sense, the GCI confirms that core human values should be global in scope and applicable to all.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of mutual coexistence is not mere rhetoric but a well-thought-out policy with guiding principles, the foremost of which is to promote inter-civilizational dialogue and transnational cooperation to pave the way for an interconnected human civilization. As the world faces the challenges from economic slowdown, ecological degradation, and a lingering Cold War mentality, China's emphasis on people-to-people dialogues and cooperation is key to building a global network for inter-civilizational cooperation. The GCI is a further testament to China's genuine belief in global prosperity, common values, and shared civilization.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The arguments put forth above explain how the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative strategically integrate with the Belt and Road Initiative to form a potent non-Western alternative that responds to the growing aspirations of the developing country majority of the global family. Kishore Mahbubani has observed that when China offers global initiatives, the seminal notion is "global" rather than the "local" frequently used by US leadership.<sup>13</sup> As such, China's global initiatives urge all countries to work together and build an open, inclusive, and symbiotic world based on universal security, enduring peace, and common prosperity.

Leadership is most essential in times of transition as leaders are called on to think creatively and diagnostically about the sources of society's well-being: which objectives deserve commitment, and which prospects must be rejected no matter how tempting. China's global initiatives are not only essential for peaceful development, but also foster "mutual respect, reciprocal benefits and win-win cooperation" in foreign affairs.

11 Kishore Mahbubani, "China's global initiatives better for the developing world," *CGTN*, 2023-07-21  
<https://news.cgtn.com/news/yQr4M6GSQ/index.html>.

12 Asif Noor, "Initiative offers path to shared prosperity," *China Daily*, 2023-04-11

13 Mahbubani, "China's global initiatives better for the developing world," *CGTN*, 2023-07-21

# Making Sense of China's Global Development Initiative

Brian Wong



Assistant Professor of Philosophy at University of Hong Kong and Rhodes Scholar

China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) is a relatively novel proposition. More precisely, it was formally introduced in President Xi Jinping's address at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021.<sup>1</sup> In his speech, Xi highlighted the case for bolstering confidence, strengthening bonds across socioeconomic and regional cleavages, and fostering favorable conditions for the joint tackling of global risks and challenges — undergirded by China's long-standing diplomatic doctrine of South-South cooperation.

In June 2022, China chaired the High-level Dialogue on Global Development, which culminated in a statement from the chair, with 32 practical measures for action and to increase international cooperation.<sup>2</sup> As such, the GDI constitutes a core advancement of China's preeminent role within global governance, by promulgating discourse aimed at reforming - as opposed to replacing - existing institutions.

The following article sets forth three objectives. First, the article sets out the problems, challenges, and structural malaise plaguing the international system in which the GDI is situated. Second, the article reiterates the particular set of principles and values to which the GDI must adhere to ensure it is truly equipped for an increasingly multipolar world - even if it is in an uneven and unequal manner.<sup>3</sup> Third, the article

- 1 Xinhua News Agency, "Xi Calls for Bolstering Confidence, Jointly Addressing Global Challenges at UNGA," [english.www.gov.cn](http://english.www.gov.cn/english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202109/22/content_WS614a816dc6d0df-57f98e0a56.html), September 22, 2021, [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202109/22/content\\_WS614a816dc6d0df-57f98e0a56.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202109/22/content_WS614a816dc6d0df-57f98e0a56.html).
- 2 United Nations, "Global Development Initiative-Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs," [sdgs.un.org](https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/global-development-initiative-building-2030-sdgs-stronger-greener-and-healthier-global), June 2022, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/global-development-initiative-building-2030-sdgs-stronger-greener-and-healthier-global>.
- 3 Paul Poast, "The Signs of the Multipolar World Are All around Us," *World Politics Review*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/multipolarity-us-vs-china-russia-superpower-hegemony/>.



outlines specific recommendations for the GDI to avoid past pitfalls experienced by countries, including China, concerning international developmental policies, especially in relation to aid and infrastructural development.

## Setting the Scene - Why the World Needs a New Developmental Framework

In its advancement of the GDI, China has several motivations, which are extensively and overtly stated and others cited more subtly. These motivations echo broader concerns harbored by the international community, in relation to existing developmental approaches, which often place an excessive level of focus on capital-intensive and -driven growth, at the expense of the environment and social considerations at large.

The first concern is that within economic orthodoxy and public policymaking consensus, economic growth has often been pitted against sustainable development, as if the two concepts were incompatible. Countries are told that growth necessarily leads to cutting corners and development of tentative inequalities and that these inequalities, and neglect of wider considerations, will be offset once countries become sufficiently prosperous. The Kuznets Curves (in both their environmental and inequality forms)<sup>4</sup> broadly capture this notion. Yet as the Earth continues to warm and sea levels rise, the world is set to surpass emission targets that 195 countries agreed at the Paris Agreement in 2016. Clearly a radical paradigm shift is needed. Each country's development need not - and should not - come at the expense of their commitment to minimizing unnecessary energy dissipation, reducing emissions, and encouraging citizens to shift away from devastating climate practices, such as industrial farming and mass grazing.<sup>5</sup>

The second concern, is that the globe is becoming precipitously unequal. Existing geographical and climate-centric divides between regions, including resource and technology induced disparities between the Global North and Global South and the surge in geopolitical and territorial conflicts, have contributed to the systematic entrenchment

4 David Stern, "Environmental Kuznets Curve - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics," [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com), 2018, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/environmental-kuznets-curve>.

5 United Nations Treaty Collection, "UNTC," Un.org, 2015, [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=XX-VII-7-d&chapter=27&clang=en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XX-VII-7-d&chapter=27&clang=en).

of global inequity. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing conflict in Ukraine, developing economies struggle to ensure their core territorial and developmental rights are recognized by well-endowed counterparts in the developed world. Significantly, the Chinese government has sought to promulgate social development as a core right for developing economies.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the right to development enhances other equally important rights that bind governments, including civil and associational liberties. However, existing appraisals of developing economies through excessively Western-centric lenses, underpinned by a fixation over political liberties and a downplaying of substantive socioeconomic welfare, do not constitute a valid means of understanding the world at large.

The third and most systemically persistent concern is that few existing multilateral organizations and transnational initiatives have thus far succeeded in reflecting the voices of the majority of citizens within the Global South. Whether it be the imposition of excessively stringent inhibitions upon the fiscal and monetary policies of developing nations<sup>7</sup> - in the name of enforcing purported financial "discipline" - or the tendency of ill-informed governmental actors working exclusively with exclusionary, exploitative political leaders that are unaccountable to their own citizens - it is clear that leading international organizations and multilateral initiatives are failing to improve the real material conditions of citizens.

## Clarifying the Substance - Pinning Down the Core Values of GDI

The GDI is designed to extend opportunities for development to the countries that need it most. Some commentators have asserted that the GDI is under-substantiated within the status quo, stating that while the GDI's ideals and aspirations are clear, its advocacy and prescriptions remain amorphous. Adoption of the principles outlined below negates the cynical assessments of the GDI's potential efficacy to provide a guide for policymakers involved in shaping the substance and content of the GDI as they embrace development aligned within a multipolar world.

First, the primary focus of the GDI is the advancement of the interests of smaller and medium states. The collective rights of developing

6 Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, "Social Development and Human Rights," [un.china-mission.gov.cn](http://un.china-mission.gov.cn), accessed July 28, 2023, <http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/socialhr/>.

7 Rebecca Ray, "IMF Austerity Is Alive and Increasing Poverty and Inequality | Global Development Policy Center," [www.bu.edu](http://www.bu.edu), April 5, 2021, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2021/04/05/imf-austerity-is-alive-and-impacting-poverty-and-inequality/>.

countries are best pursued through their state political and institutional trajectories and advancement of national interests. These rights are actively contravened by existing initiatives, which over emphasize evolutionary steps to “fit the mold” of monolithic ideals that ostensibly provide sound governance. However, sustainable international development cooperation only emerges when more powerful states acknowledge and respect the rights of smaller and medium regional powers to pursue their own agenda based on independent considerations of great power rivalry. Testament to the increasing independence and autonomy of key regions, as they emerge from the shadows of American military influence and the lingering legacy of Soviet Union, was the recent inaugural summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the five Central Asian states, which took place late July this year. The summit saw participating countries affirm the need for strengthening cooperation across trade and investment, energy, education, agriculture, culture and other sectors.<sup>8</sup> The GDI is premised on embracing and harnessing the strategic autonomy of all states.

Second, the GDI seeks to ensure that the political leaders in the respective participant governments are accountable to their people. The temptation to view leading politicians and bureaucrats as representative of the interests of the people with absolute discretion over how affairs within “their” countries are governed, must be avoided. It is certainly true that peoples of all nations possess strong and inviolable rights to governing their own affairs, but it is equally plausible to argue that countries who fail to respect the sovereignty of other nations — and ‘intervene’ justified by claiming to improve the lives of citizens in other states — are actually the worse transgressors within the international order. These facts, however, do not constitute an argument or excuse for irresponsible and callous leaders to take advantage of others’ inaction to pursue policies that are blatantly abusive for their own citizens’ interests. From the Rajapaksa administration in Sri Lanka<sup>9</sup>, which squandered billions of yuan in aid offered by China, to the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines during the Cold War that was largely propped up by expansive American aid<sup>10</sup>, it is apparent that developmental aid fails to reach the people who need it most. Thus, the GDI must keep at its core the common folk of all countries and ensure that administrators of developmental aid are answerable to and cognizant of the interests of the poor and needy.

8 Atalayar, “First Gulf Summit with Central Asian Countries Held in Saudi Arabia,” Atalayar, July 20, 2023, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/first-gulf-summit-with-central-asian-countries-held-in-saudi-arabia/20230720154539188528.html>.

9 Bloomberg, “Sri Lanka Envoy ‘Confident’ China Will Agree to Aid ‘at Some Point,’” *South China Morning Post*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3185411/sri-lanka-envoy-confident-china-will-agree-aid-requests-some>.

10 Stanley Karnow, “REAGAN and the PHILIPPINES: Setting Marcos Adrift (Published 1989),” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1989, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/19/magazine/reagan-and-the-philippines-setting-marcos-adrift.html>.

To realize these ambitions, aid programs need to adopt high standards for policy-making and implementation and not become distant and cold international technocrats or fall foul of the erratic whims of a few select, but unaccountable leaders.

Third, the GDI is positioned as a complement, but not an alternative, to existing developmental initiatives advanced by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), amongst others. Indeed, the GDI can serve as a balanced source of critique and establish constructive reforms to existing multilateral financial institutions, by illuminating superior means for sustainable development. Given the gradual awakening of populations around the world to the importance of environmental protection, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, respect and accommodation of social interests, and improvements to the quality of developmental governance globally<sup>11</sup>, it is important that the GDI serves as a point of reference and dialogue partner, as opposed to rival, for existing initiatives. All countries retain the right to exercise independent decision making and therefore cannot be asked or coerced to ‘choose sides’ between different multilateral organizations.

### Important Action Points — What should the GDI prioritize?

The three principles outlined above exemplify the urgency of the GDI and advance principles to ensure success. One practical question remains: what should the GDI prioritize substantively? Two key factors are crucial for the GDI’s successful implementation.

The first crucial factor is food security. Genuinely effective development cannot come without the nourishment of the hundreds of millions of citizens who deserve the right to life, to nutrition, and to a fair chance of obtaining better living standards. As the effects of shifting precipitation patterns and global warming continue to accelerate in the status quo, compounded by the detrimental consequences of geopolitical conflicts, it is clear that food (in)security poses a severe challenge to many countries in the Global South. Countries that lack purchasing power, stock levels, and local production are most adversely affected - including populous countries such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia, or conflict-prone and war-torn states such as Somalia and Yemen.<sup>12</sup> In

11 Georg Kell, “The Remarkable Rise of ESG,” *Forbes*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/georg-kell/2018/07/11/the-remarkable-rise-of-esg/>.

Daniel Aminetzah et al.,  
12 “Global Food Security: New Risks and Disruptions | McKinsey,” *www.mckinsey.com*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/agriculture/our-insights/a-reflection-on-global-food-security-challenges-amid-the-war-in-ukraine-and-the-early-impact-of-climate-change>.

stepping up to its role as a responsible, leading global stakeholder, China can expand its investments in effective knowledge sharing and transfer programs that equip farmers, scientists, and entrepreneurs in developing economies with cost-effective means of producing and storing food, to meet the ever-growing demand within such countries.

Indeed, the issue of food security also highlights the innate inseparability of development and peace. Civil strife and military conflicts inevitably result in mass disruption to supply chains, destruction of key agricultural and farming infrastructure, as well as population displacement, which are all intermediary causes contributing to famine and food crises globally. As noted by Chinese Ambassador to Liberia Ren Yisheng, the Chinese experience has demonstrated that a peaceful, stable society is the prerequisite for all forms of development.<sup>13</sup> Thus, China must assume a greater role as a peace-broker and mediator in regional and international conflicts, including those between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Palestine.

The second priority is the provision of mass education. Education is key to unlocking the vast human potential contained within workforces, especially when it comes to supporting the economic transition from the primary to the secondary, or, in exceptional cases, directly to the tertiary sectors. Service-sector productivity is pivotal in ensuring a country's international competitiveness, as argued in a 1992 McKinsey Quarterly article<sup>14</sup>, and crucial that governments are given the support and resources to progress their own citizens' education. As a leading country in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) research and innovation, China possesses the capacity and expertise to lead, not just by example, but by scaling existing education, academic, and knowledge exchange programs to create more scholarships and enrollment opportunities for students from developing countries. Moreover, China has the capacity to conduct genuinely meaningful dialogues and conversations with foreign counterparts to devise development paths uniquely attuned to the particular circumstances of individual states.

The Global Development Initiative is an innovative, empowering, and transformative force for good. Yet to accomplish the GDI's stated objectives and realize its potential, it must involve as many like-

13 Ren Yisheng, "Peace Is the Premise and Foundation for Development of All Kinds," [www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn), April 4, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/202204/t20220404\\_10664561.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202204/t20220404_10664561.html).

14 William Lewis et al., "Service-Sector Productivity and International Competitiveness | McKinsey," [www.mckinsey.com](http://www.mckinsey.com), October 1, 1992, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/service-sector-productivity-and-international-competitiveness>.

minded partners as possible, and feature truly representative cross-sections of stakeholders, including ordinary citizens, the burgeoning middle classes, technocrats and experts, and of course, establishment politicians from different countries, to be of service to the global poor.

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# Rising from Within: Cornerstones and Future Prospects of China's Approach to Multilateralism

Gulshan Bibi



Ph.D. candidate, School of international  
Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan  
University  
TI Youth Observer

During the post-Cold War era, China has taken part in many regional initiatives, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Six-Party Talks (6PT), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Likewise, in recent years, China has made significant strides in shaping its foreign policy through comprehensive global initiatives aimed at fostering multilateral relations and building connectivity on a global scale. At the forefront of these initiatives stands the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become a flagship project driving economic cooperation and cultural exchanges among countries spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. China's new foreign policy and economic initiatives are an indication of its rising confidence, and they will definitely result in redefining China's role in the region and around the world. Some of the following initiatives are cornerstone of its multilateral approach.

## The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road," envisions a vast network of infrastructure projects, trade routes, and economic corridors. These initiatives are designed to link countries and regions, promoting trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges along the ancient Silk Road routes, and have seen China collaborate with partner countries on major infrastructure projects such as ports, railways, roads, and energy facilities, bringing mutual benefits and opportunities for economic development.

It not only emphasizes shared development, but win-win cooperation in its economic initiatives. Through projects like the BRI, China seeks to create



opportunities for partner countries, especially developing nations, to participate in global value chains and benefit from improved infrastructure and access to markets. It envisions a future where economic growth is inclusive, and the development disparities between nations are reduced. Along with the BRI, it recognizes the importance of soft power and cultural exchange in international relations, and seeks to strengthen governmental and non-governmental ties with other nations and bridge cultural gaps.

## **China's Three Global Initiatives**

In addition to the BRI, China has strategically formulated three other global initiatives to further solidify its commitment to multilateral relations and contribute positively to global development, security, and cultural understanding.

### **i. Global Development Initiative (GDI)**

The Global Development Initiative (GDI) centers around promoting sustainable development and poverty reduction in developing nations. Through bilateral and multilateral partnerships, China aims to share its expertise in infrastructure development, industrial capacity, and technology transfer, supporting other countries' social and economic progress. The GDI aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and emphasizes South-South cooperation to address global challenges and improve living standards for all.

### **ii. Global Security Initiative (GSI)**

The Global Security Initiative (GSI) reflects China's commitment to maintaining global peace and stability. By engaging in dialogue, mutual trust, and cooperation, China seeks to address security issues, enhance counter-terrorism capacities, and reducing regional conflict risks through diplomatic means. The GSI underscores the importance of collective security efforts, respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promoting peaceful resolutions to disputes.

### iii. Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)

The Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) embodies China's belief in cultural diversity and the exchange of civilizations. By facilitating cultural exchanges, educational programs, and people-to-people connectivity, the GCI aims to strengthen mutual understanding and appreciation of different cultures. Through this initiative, China encourages a harmonious coexistence of civilizations, fostering an environment of respect, tolerance, and cooperation among nations.

Together, these four initiatives have become the cornerstones of China's approach to multilateral relations, reflecting its commitment to inclusive development, peaceful cooperation, and cultural enrichment on a global scale. China's emphasis on connectivity, shared prosperity, and win-win partnerships resonates with the spirit of cooperation and openness, laying the foundation for deeper engagement with countries worldwide. As China continues to invest in these initiatives, it is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the global landscape, driving progress in international relations, and fostering a community with a shared future for mankind.

This year, in the coastal city of Tianjin (China), global leaders, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals convened at the Summer Davos 2023. Concurrently, the Third Dialogue on Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations took place, providing an opportune moment for discussions on fostering cooperation while embracing cultural diversity. A central topic of these discussions was China's commitment to a Westphalian approach to international relations. This approach emphasizes the creation of essential infrastructure for countries to develop both internally and externally while respecting their security needs and cultural differences.

The Westphalian approach to international relations is rooted in the principles established by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This landmark treaty emphasized the legal sovereignty of nation-states and the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs. It laid the groundwork for a system of state-centric international relations, wherein countries are regarded as independent actors responsible for their own governance and development. China's commitment to the Westphalian approach can be traced back to its historical perspective on sovereignty and non-interference. As a nation that has experienced significant external interference in its past, China recognizes the importance of respecting other countries' sovereignty and their right to chart their own development paths.

At the Summer Davos Forum of 2023, China reaffirmed its dedication to this principle, emphasizing the need for mutual respect among nations.

Central to China's Westphalian approach is the recognition that to foster development, countries require critical infrastructure. China has demonstrated its commitment to helping other nations build this infrastructure through initiatives such as the BRI. As aforementioned, the BRI aims to connect regions and nations through extensive transportation networks, energy facilities, and digital connectivity. By investing in infrastructure projects, China seeks to promote economic growth and alleviate development disparities among participating countries.

China's Westphalian approach goes beyond focusing solely on external cooperation. It also underscores the significance of internal development. During the Summer Davos Forum of 2023, Chinese leaders highlighted the importance of pursuing inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and sustainable development within the nation. By ensuring its own internal stability and prosperity, China sets an example for other countries in the world, showcasing the potential benefits of internal development. It views the world as a place where multilateral cooperation is essential for addressing global challenges. Initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) showcase China's commitment to creating new avenues for international collaboration. By fostering partnerships with various countries and organizations, China seeks to supplement existing global institutions and contribute to global governance in a more inclusive and equitable manner.

China's commitment to a Westphalian approach also involves understanding and respecting the security needs and cultural differences of other nations. At the Third Dialogue on Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations, discussions revolved around the significance of cultural understanding and appreciation for diversity. China advocates for dialogue and diplomacy as means to address conflicts, avoiding imposing solutions that may not align with the specific context and needs of different countries. Along with the Westphalian approach, China utilizes economic initiatives as a tool for economic diplomacy and building diplomatic ties. By engaging in partnerships and providing foreign aid, China seeks to enhance its diplomatic influence and goodwill with partner countries.

As the Summer Davos 2023 and the Third Dialogue on Exchanges and Mutual

Learning Among Civilizations unfolded, China's dedication to a Westphalian approach to international relations shone through. Emphasizing cooperation, infrastructure development, and respect for sovereignty, security needs, and cultural diversity, China showcased its commitment to fostering a harmonious global community. Through such initiatives, China envisions a world where nations can collaborate, develop, and coexist peacefully, leading to mutual prosperity and collective progress on the global stage.

**So how feasible is China's approach? Let's discuss whether it is compatible with post-WWII order and Washington Consensus model or not.** It has become a fact now that China's approach to international relations, centered around a Westphalian model, emphasizing infrastructure development, respect for sovereignty, and cultural understanding, has demonstrated feasibility through tangible projects and growing partnerships. BRI, in particular, has seen substantial progress with investments in various countries, fostering economic growth and connectivity. China's commitment to cultural exchanges and dialogue through initiatives like the Third Dialogue on Exchanges and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations reinforces its dedication to cooperation and mutual understanding. Its approach is both complimentary and, to a little extent, in competition with existing post-WWII order institutions. While it aims to complement international efforts in development and cooperation, certain aspects of the BRI have raised questions about competition with established institutions. The BRI's scale and scope have been seen by some as an alternative or parallel mechanism to traditional development assistance provided by institutions like the World Bank.

However, it is important to note that China also collaborates with these institutions in various capacities, and its approach is not strictly antagonistic towards them. For instance, China has been an active member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2001. China's approach diverges significantly from the Washington Consensus model, which was promoted by Western institutions and emphasized market-oriented policies, liberalization, and privatization. In fact, China's development path has combined elements of state-led economic planning with market-oriented reforms, allowing the government to play a substantial role in guiding economic growth and development.

The data from China's National Bureau of Statistics shows that China's gross domestic product grew 4.5 percent during initial months of this year, and it has also set a goal of around 5% growth for the full year of 2023. Through targeted policies and investment in social welfare programs, China has made substantial

progress in reducing poverty and improving living standards for its citizens. Its economy has experienced remarkable growth and development over the past few decades, leading to a wide range of benefits for both China and the global community. Its economic strength has acted as a stabilizing force in the global market, particularly during current economic downturn. Its consumer demand and investment have played a crucial role in supporting global economic growth.

Along with economic development, it also offers world investment in research and development (R&D). China's heavy investment in R&D has led to significant advancements in technology and innovation. This has contributed to global progress in areas such as telecommunications, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and more.

While China's approach is not fully aligned with the Washington Consensus, it does not necessarily reject all aspects of liberal economic principles. China has integrated certain market-oriented reforms and actively participates in global trade, albeit with its Chinese characteristics and distinct policies and regulations.

China's Westphalian approach has proven feasible and has garnered significant support. While it complements existing post-WWII order institutions in certain areas, it may also present some competition in terms of development initiatives. Although not fully compatible with the Washington Consensus model, China has incorporated certain market-oriented policies while pursuing its unique development path. As global dynamics continue to evolve, China's approach will likely play a significant role in shaping international relations and development in the years to come.

In short, China views the world through a lens of economic cooperation, connectivity, and shared development. Its economic initiatives reflect a strategic vision to promote multilateralism, foster cultural exchange, and contribute to sustainable and inclusive global growth. By positioning itself as an active participant in the global economic landscape, China seeks to leave a lasting impact on international relations and global economic governance. The benefits of the Chinese economy extend beyond its borders, positively impacting the global community through trade, investment, poverty reduction, innovation, and sustainable development efforts.

In the foreseeable future, China's general posture toward regional multilateral security cooperation will consist of active participation and strong support.

As China continues to evolve as a major player in the global economy, its contributions are likely to shape the world's economic landscape. China's initiatives reaffirm a universal principle of peace, development, and cooperation. Countries around the world should not only consider strategies which emphasize strengthened bilateral relationships between them and Beijing, but also continue to positively support regional and global multilateral institutions for a better future of this world.

## About this volume

TI Observer would like to thank the following individuals for their time and insights.

### Commentators



#### Warwick Powell

Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology, Australia; the author of *China, Trust and Digital Supply Chains. Dynamics of a Zero Trust World.*



#### Paul Wang

Professor of International Law and International Relations at the Shi Liang School of Law, Changzhou University



#### Brian Wong

Assistant Professor of Philosophy at University of Hong Kong and Rhodes Scholar



#### Gulshan Bibi

Ph.D. candidate, School of international Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University  
TI Youth Observer

## TIO Executive Committee



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TIO Content Advisor  
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International Communications Officer



### Lizzie Yin Xiaohong

Senior International Communications Officer

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## Taihe Institute

[www.taiheinstitute.org/en](http://www.taiheinstitute.org/en)



太和智库  
Taihe Institute



Taihe Institute

## Address

23/F, ShunMaijinZuan Plaza,  
A-52 Southern East Third Ring Road,  
Chaoyang District, Beijing

## Telephone

+86-10-84351977

## Postcode

100022

## Fax

+86-10-84351957