Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction in an Age of Global Contestation

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The Global Security Initiative

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Introduction

In April 2022, two months after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a speech at the Boao Forum for Asia, an annual conference for business executives and world leaders, in which he proposed an effort to promote the "common security of the world", calling it the Global Security Initiative (GSI, 全球安全倡议) (Xi 2022). While most Western countries were too preoccupied with the war in Ukraine to pay much attention at the time, the proposal quickly emerged as one of the most visible buzzwords of Chinese foreign and security policy. The initiative has been loudly promoted in the forums of global diplomacy and on the pages, websites, and radio waves of the Chinese state-affiliated media. Chinese scholarly communities, meanwhile, have produced troves of articles and commentaries to explain its significance, seeing the GSI as a Chinese effort to "contribute to world peace, prosperity and stability" (Liu and Tang 2023), or in the words of one commentator, nothing less than the "liberation and ultimate unity of the proletariat", as described in the Communist Manifesto (Zheng 2023).

The GSI has been promoted along with two other sister initiatives, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which were launched in 2021 and 2023, respectively. A fourth initiative, Global Governance Initiative (GGI), was announced in September 2025 as this book was going to press. Together, the "three initiatives" embody the People's Republic of China's (PRC) plan for reforming the international order and its institutional structures along Chinese lines, and as a part of this trinity, the GSI provides an official Chinese vision of a stable and just security order.

China's interest in global reform is not entirely new, as the country has maintained a contradictory relationship with the international order since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. However, during Xi Jinping's term in power (2012–present), China has shown an increasingly assertive posture, since Chinese leaders have assessed that the United States and the broader West are in irreversible decline. Especially since the beginning of Xi's second term (2017–2022), the administration has been openly promoting China's plans to "lead in the reform of the international order" into a more "just and rational" order aided by "Chinese wisdom" (Xinhua 2018). Beijing, in other words, is transforming from being

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a "globalised power" to a "globalising power" under Xi's term (Denisov, Paramonov, Arapova, and Safranchuk 2021, 80).

At the centre of Xi's vision is the Community of Shared Future for Mankind (人类命运共同体), first mentioned in 2013 and subsequently repeated in his speeches, which is an international order that would rid the world of its "law of the jungle"-style great power competition while balancing the global economic system towards a fairer distribution of wealth (Xi 2024). The three initiatives (GSI, GDI, and GCI) are the main pillars of this vision, detailing policies and institutional solutions in their corresponding domains. The GSI represents the hard core of China's vision of order, with its security infrastructure ranging from the role of great power and nuclear weapons to the foundational principles of state-to-state interaction.

In this chapter, we analyse China's vision of a security order from an *Innenpolitik* perspective. We review both official government-sanctioned publications related to the initiative as well as their commentaries in the Chinese scholarly discourse, revealing how foreign policy ideas are generated and regenerated in a mutually reinforcing manner from the top party leadership down to academic writings (Zhao 2020; Chen, Panda, and Ghiasy 2024). By combining official sources and their commentaries, we aim to reach beyond the often ambiguous and ideologically laden scripture of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shed light on Beijing's motives and goals in its vision of global security.

As for data, in addition to official documents freely available from the internet (e.g. a 2023 concept paper and the speeches of Xi and other top officials), we retrieved academic journal and policy magazine articles from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure platform using the keyword "GSI". This sample was limited to the period from January 2022 to July 2024, resulting in 229 articles. We then narrowed down the sample according to the reputations of the affiliated institutions of the Chinese authors and, to a lesser extent, the journals. In the end, we analysed and incorporated 39 scholarly articles. Our premise was that, used as a proxy, these scholars, whether at universities or at a more directly Party–state-tied academies, were all expected to work for China in some manner (Glaser and Saunders 2002), or to contribute "to the building of socialism" (Wang 1997), in the official CCP jargon.

In the following section, we begin by briefly describing the historical roots of the GSI. Then, we discuss the concept as laid out in official publications and commented on by Chinese scholars. In the final section, we compare the vision with the analytical framework of the book.

A Short History of the Chinese Vision of Order

China's vision of a durable international order has maintained considerable stability throughout the history of the People's Republic. While the country wants to present the GSI and its sister initiatives as a groundbreaking project, the conceptual core of its foreign policy goes back to the "five principles of peaceful co-existence" proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai in the early 1950s.[1] Although they have been rebranded under different monikers and supplemented with new concepts, the five principles, especially their emphasis on territorial sovereignty and

non-interference, have remained at the heart of China's foreign policy through all subsequent Chinese administrations.

The end of the Cold War and China's rapid integration into the liberal order prompted China to clarify its relationship with the order. Jiang Zemin's (1989–2002) administration defined an ideal world order as a "peaceful, stable, just and rational international order", with mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, echoing the five principles (Jiang 1992). Beginning in 1997, the vision was reinforced with the New Security Concept (新安全观), which reimagined security through a "win–win" approach and commonality and reframed military alliances as remnants of the Cold War. In addition, Jiang's administration brought forth concepts such as the "diversity of civilisations" (各国文明的多样性) and "democratisation of international relations" (国际关系的民主化), which envisioned an international order stripped of the dominance of liberal ideology, and in which developing states would have more say (Ghiasy and Panda 2024; Puranen 2020, 148–58).

During Hu Jintao's presidency (2002–2012), China promoted the vision of a "Harmonious World" (和谐世界). It acknowledged the five principles as its normative essence and presented a vision of global order in which different political ideologies, civilisations, and cultures would prosper together and learn from each other without the presence of military or ideological hegemonies. While Hu's vision remained vague in terms of any concrete details and basically bundled preceding concepts under a new title with Confucian overtones, it did represent the first comprehensive Chinese vision of order promoted under a single memorable slogan (Mariani 2024; Puranen 2020, 148–58).

It is during Xi Jinping's tenure, however, when Chinese order-building has really taken off, with Xi starting to promote his vision of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind. This vision gained global visibility in 2015 when Xi described it as a Chinese proposal for the reform of the international order at the 70th anniversary celebrations of the United Nations (UN) (Xi 2015). Conceptually, the Community of Shared Future adds few new elements to its predecessors' visions, and like Hu's harmonious world, it envisions a peaceful international order with civilisations mingling harmoniously and acquiescing in the guiding role of the five principles, with the UN as the central authoritative institution (He 2020). It is, however, the vigour and intensity of its promotion, combined with China's concrete initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiatives that marks a difference from the past.

The three initiatives represent the newest push in China's order-building and an elaboration of the developmental, cultural, and security aspects of Xi's vision. The timing of their promulgation is important, as it coincides with intensifying tensions caused by great power competition. Chinese leadership is increasingly concerned about "block confrontation" (集团对抗) and "campification" (阵营化) – that is, coalitions, military partnerships, and alliances developed by the United States, especially in East Asia, to balance China's rise. In addition to security treaties, China sees the United States creating "small yards with high walls" (小院高墙) – economic and technological groupings designed to decouple from China – to contain China's economic development (Wang 2022). The three initiatives, especially

the GSI, are constructed as a counterargument against "campification", especially directed at the developing world, where China sees the competition for partners with the United States as being the most intense.

The GSI and Its Main Principles

The GSI presents itself as a "fix-all" solution for the numerous security crises haunting the contemporary world. While its solution is a conceptual Frankenstein's monster of earlier Chinese foreign policy ideas, harking back to Jiang, Hu, and even to the five principles, it does attempt to define China's vision of a global security order in more detail than its predecessors.

The 2023 concept paper, giving the most detailed account of the GSI, describes mankind as being at a "crossroads of history" and facing "multiple risks and challenges rarely seen before". These include "regional security hotspots", "local conflicts", and, most worryingly, "unilateralism and protectionism" – a euphemism for the United States and its presumably anti-China policies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023). Since the prevailing order and its security framework are unable to deal with these challenges, the GSI suggests six core principles (or "commitments") to guide the establishment of a more stable order:

1 Attaining common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security.
2 Respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.
3 Abiding by the purpose and principles of the UN Charter.
4 Taking the "legitimate security concerns" (正当合理安全关切) of all countries seriously.
5 Peacefully resolving disputes between countries through dialogue.
6 Maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional fields.

First, like its predecessors, the GSI heavily emphasises state sovereignty and territorial integrity, which should not be violated under any circumstances (principle 2). This also includes states' right to choose their own "development paths" (Xi 2022), which the West is seen as abusing through the use of "human rights" as a smokescreen for its interventions (Liu 2023) or by inciting "colour revolutions" to spread its ideological influence (Shin 2024). Against this strict Westphalian understanding of sovereignty, all states (big or small) are seen as equal.

The emphasis on the purpose and principles of the UN Charter is also a classic touch, as China's vision of order has consistently emphasised that the country upholds the international order based on the UN and the organisations under its supervision. The UN Charter is seen as almost a sacred document, its original design embodying "true multilateralism", which, in Chinese scholars' view, means the cooperative and collective management of security (Wu 2023, 153; Yu and Jia 2023, 56–63; Qiu 2023, 20; Jia and Sun 2023, 87; Wang and Gao 2023, 47). The GSI thus envisions the UN, with its Security Council, as the central force of international relations that it was originally designed to be, through which major decisions are handled via cooperative and consultative processes.

In the Chinese view, the original spirit of the UN has been increasingly under attack by the "fake multilateralism" represented by the West. It has been replaced by "unilateralism and hegemonism" and "false peace in the guise of multilateralism" – buzzwords referring to US-led alliance systems, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Peng and Xue 2023, 87; Wu 2023, 153; Yu and Jia 2023, 56; Jia and Sun 2023, 81), newly minted "Indo-Pacific alliances", and "mini-multilateralism" of various forms (Zheng 2023), which are arguably utilised to "contain" China (Zou 2023, 21). The GSI thus calls the global community to fight back against Western "Cold War thinking" and to return to the original spirit of the UN Charter.

With these core principles, the GSI envisions a UN-centred security order in which sovereignty and territorial integrity reign supreme and military alliances are disbanded as anachronic remnants of a bygone era. However, it is with its conception of security (described in principles 1, 4, and 6) that the vision becomes more perplexing. According to official publications, the GSI is based on "common, comprehensive, cooperative" and "indivisible security". The terms themselves are not new, as they bear the marks of Jiang's "new security concept" and had already been mentioned by Xi in 2014 at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia. Peng and Xue (2023) noted that the first document to uphold "indivisible security" actually appeared in the 1975 Helsinki Accords.

The GSI's conception of common and indivisible security advocates "indivisibility between individual security and common security", between "traditional security and non-traditional security", between "security rights and security obligations", and between "security and development" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). This concept is thus holistic in essence, with domestic, global, traditional, and non-traditional security issues forming a deep web of interdependent connections, very much in line with China's domestic conception of "comprehensive national security" (总体国家安全观) (Nyman 2023).

The GSI concept paper describes mankind as forming a community of indivisible security (人类是不可分割的安全共同体) that tightly connects every state's security to the global system. Chinese scholars have interpreted this point as closely linked to China's domestic security. For example, Jia and Sun (2023) called the GSI an embodiment of PRC national security, while Yang and Zhang (2023) suggested that the same traditional and non-traditional insecurity that threatens China's national security also challenges global security. They argued that the GSI would push forward the improvement of China's national security while at the same time shaping an external environment conducive to China's development (Zheng 2023).

Second, due to its holistic nature, the GSI frames security between two or more states not as an "absolute" zero-sum game but as a systemic condition in which the security of the states is mutually interlinked. As Yu and Jia (2023) argued, acts that seek "absolute security" at the expense of others will not result in the desired security outcome, and they pointed, as an example, to the situation in the Middle East, where Israel is criticised for thinking too much in terms of "absolute security" while relying excessively on military means to achieve it. Israel is also seen as imposing too many conditions and impediments regarding peace talks, as it demands that the Palestinian side acquiesce to its absolute security (Yu and Jia 2023). The message

here is that because security is indivisible, Israel cannot hope to achieve it without considering the "legitimate security concerns" of the Palestinians.

This brings us to the fourth principle of the GSI, on "legitimate security concerns". As with other terms, this concept has never been clearly defined. Before it was mentioned by Xi as part of his redefinition of security around 2014, the concept was occasionally used by scholars to describe conflict in the Korean Peninsula (e.g. Ge 2004). However, the use of the term has exploded following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see Chapter 15 on Russia) and has become central to China's narrative relating to the war. The concept, in essence, implies that states can possess certain "security concerns", which, under vaguely defined conditions, can take precedence over the GSI's principles of territorial sovereignty and justify an armed response. Although it is not explicitly stated, China appears to view the West's alleged promotion of "colour revolutions" and Ukraine's potential NATO membership as infringing Russia's "legitimate security concerns", effectively legitimising its invasion, even within the GSI's strict Westphalian framework of state sovereignty.

For many outside observers, the increased use of the concept seems to suggest that China tacitly supports Russia's invasion and is perhaps even preparing the ground for military action in the South China Sea or against Taiwan (Kuo 2024; Aksoy, Enamorado, and Yang 2024). Chinese scholars, although unable to provide any more lucid definitions than the government, have attempted to at least refute such a connection by claiming that the concept is older than the war in Ukraine (Wu 2023, 153) and actually has its roots in the West, as noted earlier. For Yu and Jia (2023, 60), China's position in Ukraine is "based on the merits of the matter".

Realising the Vision

After the section on core principles, the concept paper provides concrete steps for their implementation and lists 20 priority areas in which China will increase its cooperation. Many Chinese scholars have written about *Shixian lujing* (实现路径) or *Shijian lujing* (实践路径), translated into English as a "practice path" or "implementation pathway" (Wu 2023), to shed light on how these mechanisms could realise the GSI.

At the core of the priority areas are issues of high politics – namely, stable great power relations, control of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as conflict resolution through political consultations. Below the level of great power relations, the GSI suggests approaches to managing ongoing conflicts in five different regions: Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific region. After regions, the concept paper discusses specific challenging domains of security, such as maritime law, space, and emerging technologies, providing Chinese approaches for their peaceful management (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). Overall, the prioritised regions serve as an attempt to give the impression of a more global reach of China's vision, in contrast to the United States' "Indo-Pacific" focus, although Europe, rather surprisingly, is not included in the list of regions, notwithstanding the war in Ukraine and China's self-claimed interests in ending the conflict.

The final section of the concept paper provides an institutional framework – five broad platforms and mechanisms of cooperation – for realising the GSI. The UN and its organisations are placed at the centre, but beyond the UN, the concept paper promotes several China-led platforms or platforms in which China plays a significant role, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the BRICS+, and the newly established "China+Central Asia" forum. In addition to these organisations, the paper suggests top-level summits and China-led security forums (e.g. the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum, the Middle East Security Forum, and the Xiangshan Forum) as platforms for advancing the GSI's agenda (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

Of these, Chinese scholars have mentioned the SCO as an exemplary prototype institution. The SCO is seen as an important means to eradicate instability in the Central Asian region, since it has – in the view of Yu and Jia (2023, 65) – "always placed equal importance on security and development, addressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges in a synchronised manner. . . . Thus, it has achieved pragmatic results in many areas, which have directly benefited people's well-being". The same authors contend that the SCO has created a good model for China to further implement the newly minted GDI and GSI together (Yu and Jia 2023, 66). In addition to the SCO, Zhang (2023) brought forth the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an exemplary institution that shows a high degree of commonality with the concepts of the GDI and the GSI.

As the GSI understands security as holistically connected to other domains of human activity, especially economic development, the vision should not be seen in isolation but as closely connected to its sister initiatives, the GDI and the GCI. In Chinese thinking, security and social stability are closely linked to economic development, and the CCP leaders' perceived experiences of success in China's domestic governance have guided China's participation in international cooperation. Xi proposed the GDI in 2021 during the general debate of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, calling for the building of a "a global community of development with a shared future" – a vision that he argued was deeply rooted in China's domestic experiences of development (Yu and Jia 2023, 52–53). More ambiguously, the GCI has called for the nurturing of a "common civilisation" in which the common value of humanity is stressed (Jia and Sun 2023, 92). Together, the three initiatives serve as a stepping stone towards the "Community of Shared Future", of which the GDI is arguably the "first step" because economic development paves the way for stability and security.

The GSI and the Four Dimensions of International Order

To summarise, the GSI envisions an international security order in which the UN acts as an institutional centre and for which its charter (especially the principles on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention) serves as the guiding document. Moreover, it sees security as a holistic condition between states and as closely connected to other domains of activity, especially to economic and social

contexts. Seen against the four analytical dimensions of this book, the global security order that the GSI promotes can be examined as follows.

In terms of *power distribution*, the GSI is presented as an egalitarian security order that respects state sovereignty and equality between states (big and small), and in which the unilateral interventionism of great powers (mainly the United States and its Western allies) has come to an end. While it is not explicitly stated in the official publications, China prefers a more de-Americanised order in which the role of the United States is considerably diminished. The GSI is ambivalent about the polarity of the order, although it constantly emphasises its multipolarisation as a positive trend. In addition, the GSI strongly condemns the existence of hegemonies that would dominate other states, either militarily or through indirect ideological and economic means. This includes China as well, as it is never explicitly presented as a new centre or the unipole of the emerging order. In essence, then, the GSI envisions a multipolar order with numerous centres of power, but one that is stable and peaceful, and in which great powers respect each other's interests, especially their "legitimate security concerns". In its framing of power distribution, the GSI thus shares considerable similarities with Russia's vision (see Chapter 15).

As for the *normative* dimension, although ideological aspects of China's vision are discussed in more detail in the GDI and GCI, the GSI also frames the West as an endemic source of global security challenges, as it stubbornly promotes its liberal ideas on democracy and human rights – ultimately even through inciting "colour revolutions" in sovereign states. Thus, the GSI advocates an ideologically ambivalent global order without universal ideologies, in which all states are able to volitionally choose their "development paths" based on their cultural and political conditions. State sovereignty, one of the GSI's core principles, thus extends to states' ideological domains, which should remain off limits to external interference. Although concepts such as justice, democracy, and freedom are presented as values collectively shared and pursued by humanity, these values are never clearly defined, and certainly not viewed through a liberal-democratic lens. They are seen as meta-values concerning interstate relations – that is, democracy and justice *between* states, as well as the freedom to choose one's own path, but each state maintains its own authority to interpret what it holds domestically.

From an *institutional* perspective, the GSI advocates an international order centred on the UN and its sub-organisations, which should be reformed to better serve the interests of the emerging Global South. However, the scope of Chinese-proposed reforms remains rather moderate – lip service, even; for example, China does not advocate the inclusion of new permanent members in the UN Security Council with veto powers. In addition to the prevailing UN regime, both official publications and Chinese scholars have proposed China-led organisations, such as the SCO and BRICS+, as supporting the role of the UN in their respective domains. Chinese scholars have especially emphasised the SCO as a promising example – perhaps even a prototype institution of China's global vision – which embodies the "five principles of peaceful co-existence" in its actions. Overall, the GSI can thus be read as a status quo position within the prevailing institutional framework. It is

not in need of an overhaul but an upgrade, and some Chinese scholars envision the GSI as an upgraded UN, pointing the way towards the final evolution of the world system into a true world government or a "United Earth Government" (Jia and Sun 2023, 97–98).

As for its *temporality*, the GSI is a future-oriented initiative, yet it is also firmly grounded in decades-old principles of Chinese foreign policy. At the same time, the concept builds on China's traditional *tianxia* (天下) conception of the world, in which, ideally, all diverse cultures and peoples under Heaven prosper in great harmony (see Puranen 2020). Official publications are ambiguous on the exact timetable of the GSI's future development, but the concept is clearly connected to China's timeline for reaching domestic rejuvenation by the PRC's centennial in 2049. In the CCP's plans, this rejuvenation will coincide with the emergence of China as a global superpower, while the Chinese People's Liberation Army envisions that China will have a "world class" (世界一流) military force around the same time. While official publications are vague, some Chinese scholars have proposed precise timelines for the realisation of the GSI. Jia and Sun (2023, 93–95), for example, argued that within five years from 2023, China should work with the international community to run the GSI, the GDI, and GCI in parallel, finding synergy among them with the aim of enhancing the global governance system. By 2035, the GDI should "empower" the GSI and the GCI, while in the final phase, the Community of Shared Future would be formed around mid-century.

In conclusion, the GSI envisions a global security order, in which the sovereignty of states would reign supreme, and unilateral actions against other states would be strictly forbidden. The order would have no hegemonic centres or universal values but would allow different cultures and political systems to coexist in harmony. By power distribution it would be a multipolar order – one, in which the negative traits of international anarchy have been transcended and replaced by deep, interdependent cooperation between the poles. In place of a great power unipole, the UN would serve as a balancing nexus, arbitrating contradicting interests.

The Chinese vision, in essence, represents an order that aims to boost the legitimacy of China's authoritarian political system while generating support within the Global South. It would shield China from pressure to liberalise by presenting its "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" as one voice in a global harmony of ideologies. And while the order would adhere to a strict, Westphalian interpretation of sovereignty, the concept of "legitimate security concerns" leaves the door open for "legitimate" military action within China's self-defined sphere of interests, which includes Taiwan and the South China Sea. At the same time, China could utilise the institutional structures of the order to advance its interests – for example, by using UN platforms for limiting international criticism of its human rights record and blocking Taiwan's participation in any international bodies. Thus, while the GSI presents a rhetorically strong vision of a future security order of lasting stability, it is ultimately designed to weaken the perceived threats posed by the liberal West against the undisputed ruling position of the CCP.

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Note

1 The five principles are mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Xi 2024).

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