

Silk Cage Series - I

**From Corridors to Control:
China's Long Shadow in
South Asia and the Indian
Ocean Region**

Webinar Report

February 17, 2026



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Dr. Angela Stanzel is a Senior Associate in the Asia Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Her research topics include China's foreign and security policy, and in particular EU-China relations as well as Cross-Strait relations. Before joining SWP, she was a Senior Policy Fellow in the Asia Program and the representative in Germany of Institut Montaigne. She was also the editor of the institute's quarterly publication, *China Trends*. Prior to that, Angela Stanzel worked as Senior Policy Fellow and editor of *China Analysis* in the Asia Program at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Berlin. She earned her PhD in Sinology at the Free University of Berlin in 2013. Her dissertation focused on China-Pakistan relations.



John S. Van Oudenaren is a research analyst at BluePath Labs specializing in Chinese foreign and security affairs. He was previously China Brief editor at the Jamestown Foundation and held roles at the National Bureau of Asian Research, the Asia Society Policy Institute, and the National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs. John holds an MA (Asian Studies) from the George Washington University and a BA (history) from St. Mary's College of Maryland. His areas of research focus include China's approach to major power relations, Chinese-led multilateral initiatives such as BRI and GSI, and China's defense industrial base.



Dr. Jiayi Zhou is a Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Her research is at the intersection of sustainable development and great power competition, with a particular focus on resource security. She has held fellowships with the Bank of Finland Institute for Transition Economics (BOFIT), Kennan Institute of the Wilson Center, Pacific Forum CSIS, and elsewhere. She is published in academic outlets in addition to her policy-related research, including *Political Geography*, *Critical Security Studies*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, and *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*. She holds a PhD in Environmental Science.



Professor Masayuki Masuda, head of the China Division at the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) in Japan. Professor Masayuki Masuda joined the NIDS in April 2003 as a research fellow and served as head of the Government & Law Division and Asia & Africa Division. He became head of the China Division at NIDS in April, 2024. Professor Masuda also held visiting fellowship positions at the East-West Center and Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in 2015-16. In 2023-2025, he served as the Partner country Project Director (PPD) for a NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme (SPS) project looking at futures in the Indo-Pacific.



Dr. Scott N. Romaniuk is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Asia Studies, Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies (CIAS), and the Institute of Global Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, as well as a Senior Researcher at the Africa Research Institute, Óbuda University, Hungary. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow at The Dialogue, India. He holds a PhD in International Studies from the University of Trento, Italy. His

current work examines the governance of emerging technologies, their role in great power politics, and their implications for regional and global security, including terrorism and counter-terrorism. He is the editor of several forthcoming volumes, including *The Palgrave Handbook of Geopolitics and Security in the Indo-Pacific* (Springer, in press), *The Routledge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence and National Security* (Routledge, in press), and *Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing through Hawala Money Transfer Operators* (Springer, in press).

Moderator



Dr. Jagannath Panda is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Sweden. Dr. Panda is also a Professor at the Department of Regional and Global Studies at the University of Warsaw; and a Senior Fellow at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies in the Netherlands. As a senior expert on China, East Asia, and Indo-Pacific affairs, Prof. Panda has testified to the

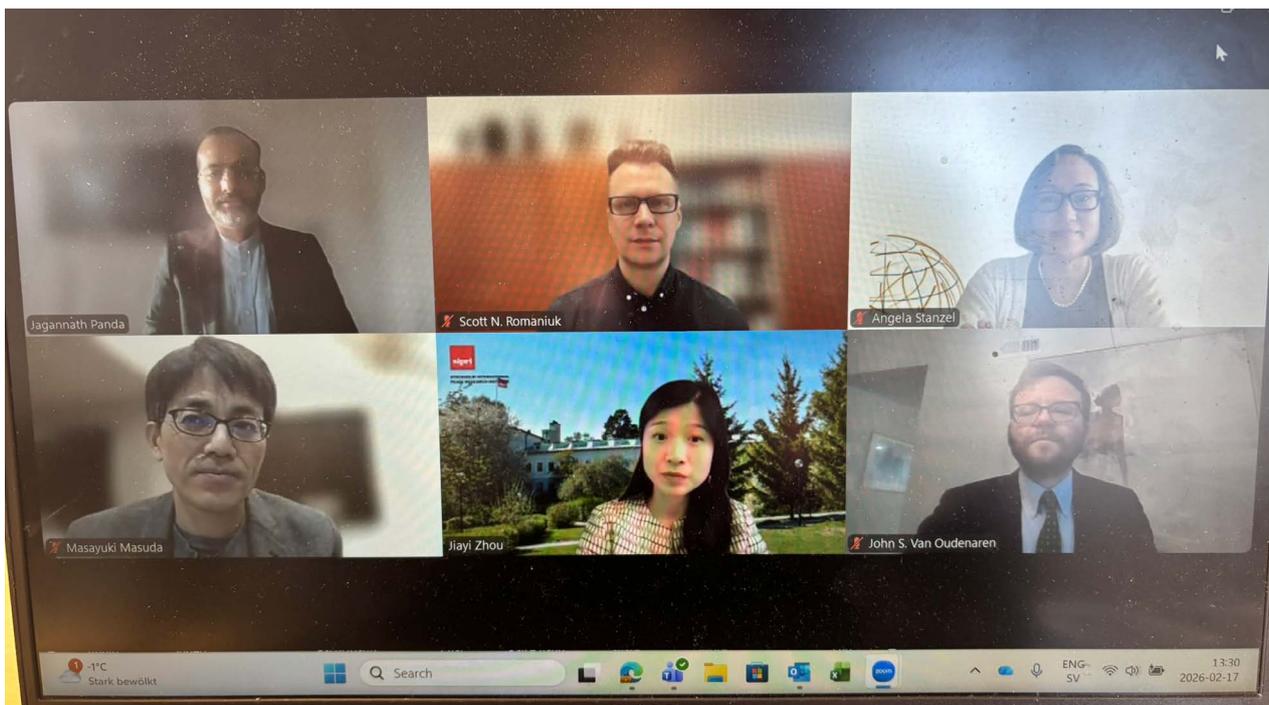
US-China Economic and Security Review Commission at the US Congress on 'China and South Asia'. He is the Series Editor for *Routledge Studies on Think Asia*.

DISCUSSION

This webinar, organized by the SCSA-IPA at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), was held on February 17, 2026 as the first part of a series on the ‘Silk Cage’. This series seeks to address China’s expanding role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It revolves around the central question: where does connectivity end and strategic control begin? The entire webinar is available on [YouTube](#).

While Beijing frames its engagement as development-oriented and mutually beneficial, critics argue that China is constructing a layered architecture of influence that reshapes political choices, security alignments, and the regional order. This debate between partnership and power, opportunity and dependence, lies at the heart of contemporary assessments of China’s neighborhood and maritime strategy.

Over the past decade, China’s engagement across South Asia and the IOR has evolved from a focus on infrastructure corridors into a broader strategic enterprise. What began as economic outreach through ports, roads, energy projects, and logistics hubs has expanded into a multi-domain presence encompassing political access, security cooperation, maritime reach, and narrative influence. China’s long shadow today stretches seamlessly from



continental South Asia into the Indian Ocean, blurring the boundary between land-based neighborhood strategy and maritime power projection.

This first webinar of the ‘Silk Cage Series’ situates South Asia and the Indian Ocean within China’s evolving strategic architecture. Moving beyond binaries of cooperation versus coercion, it examines how development, security, and narrative frameworks interact, and how China’s long shadow may shape the future order of the South Asian–Indian Ocean space.

This webinar addressed the following questions in general:

- How do Xi Jinping’s Global Development, Security, and Civilization Initiatives shape China’s engagement in South Asia and the IOR?
- At what point does connectivity translate into strategic dependence and indirect control?
- How much agency do South Asian and Indian Ocean states retain amid China’s layered influence architecture?
- What are the implications of China’s land–sea strategy for India’s (and other countries’) continental and maritime security?
- How should the EU, Japan, and the US respond to China’s integrated development–security–narrative approach?

The discussions centered on China’s evolving strategic focus, specifically through the lens of three new “Global



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Initiatives” and their reception on the world stage. The first of these, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) introduced in 2021, acts as the “software” to the Belt and Road Initiative’s physical infrastructure. By pivoting the global conversation back to a “development first” mandate, the GDI seeks to align Chinese-led projects with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Its primary aim is to ensure that international investments translate into tangible local benefits, such as job creation, food security, and “green” development,

thereby securing the economic viability of host nations.

Building on this economic foundation, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) launched in 2022 provides the protective framework for these investments. The GSI is designed to insulate economic corridors from regional instability and terrorism while explicitly rejecting “Cold War mentalities” or bloc-based alliances. It operates on the principle that no country should strengthen its own security at the expense of another’s—a stance that China uses to justify its deepening security and military cooperation with Pakistan. By framing security as a collective necessity rather than a competitive pursuit, the GSI seeks to stabilize the environments where Chinese capital is most active.

Finally, the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) of 2023 provides the ideological backbone for this shift, advocating for a “diversity of civilizations.” The GCI challenges the idea of a universal model for democracy or human rights, asserting instead that every nation has the sovereign right to choose its own developmental path based on its unique history and culture. Within this framework, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is reimagined as more than just a series of roads and power plants; it is presented as a “people-to-people” exchange that honors local sovereignty and cultural identity. Together, these three initiatives represent a holistic attempt by China to redefine the norms of

global governance.

Dr Jagannath Panda opened the session by outlining the central objective of the webinar: to analyse and investigate China’s expanding strategic influence and growing strategic inroads in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. He noted that China’s influence operations have been significantly advanced through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has expanded rapidly across Southeast Asia while developing strong linkages with the Indian Ocean Region.

He further highlighted that, more recently, Xi Jinping has proposed three initiatives which are commonly referred to in Chinese public discourse as the provision of Global Public Goods. These include the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. The webinar, he explained, would examine these three initiatives specifically in the context of South Asia and China’s strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean Region.

Elaborating on their scope, he observed that the Global Development Initiative is primarily linked to infrastructure connectivity and development cooperation. The Global Security Initiative, by contrast, focuses on regional stability, while the Global Civilization Initiative emphasizes what China presents as an alternative model of governance, including opposition to external intervention. In this context, he noted that the Chinese narrative stresses

sovereignty, cultural pluralism, and normative discourse, while simultaneously promoting an alternative framework for global governance.

Framing the discussion, he posed a set of guiding questions for the webinar:

- To what extent are these initiatives and connectivity projects linked to China's broader influence-operation strategy?
- Should they be understood as cooperative mechanisms, or as instruments of coercion within the region?
- And whether these initiatives are genuinely developmental in nature or whether they risk creating long-term dependency on China among participating countries?

The first speaker, **Dr Angela Stanzel**, addressed the guiding questions by examining how China's three global initiatives should be understood in the context of South Asia, and how Chinese institutions and agencies are employed to influence foreign policy orientations and security. She structured her remarks around three main points.

First, she emphasized that China's global initiatives have been a long time in the making. These frameworks particularly in their intersection with South Asia have undergone extensive testing and adaptation over time to determine what works and what does not. China, she argued, has been planning for decades to establish networks across Asia, with South Asia playing a particularly important role. From the outset, these frameworks were intended to serve not only China's commercial interests, but also its broader geopolitical and security objectives across the region.

She noted that around two decades ago this strategy was commonly described as the "String of Pearls", which focused on the establishment of a maritime infrastructure network in the Indian Ocean region. India in particular, but also the United States, expressed concerns that this strategy was designed to encircle India and expand China's regional influence. China's investment in Pakistan's port of Gwadar was frequently cited as an example, as it was perceived not merely as a commercial port project, but as a deep-sea facility with

potential military applications, enabling China to project power and emerge as a security actor in the Indian Ocean. She also recalled that discussions on building an economic corridor through Pakistan were already underway in 2007–2008, well before these plans were formalized under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013.

Her second point focused on the role of the BRI in reframing this earlier narrative. She argued that the BRI served as a powerful counter-narrative to the String of Pearls, functioning as an effective umbrella concept that brought together China’s diverse activities in South Asia under a single, positive brand. This enabled China to significantly expand its infrastructure investments, particularly in ports. While the BRI was initially driven by the need to access new markets and export China’s industrial overcapacities, it also allowed Beijing to deepen partnerships and gradually move towards stronger political and security relationships.

Her third point traced the evolution from the pre-BRI phase to the present. She explained that the period before the BRI focused on laying the foundations for China’s emergence as a geo-economic and strategic actor; the BRI then marked a phase of global connectivity. The current Global Development, Security, and Civilization Initiatives, by contrast, represent an effort to position China as a normative power.

These initiatives are explicitly framed as alternatives to Western international norms, emphasizing principles such as



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– Angela Stanzel

sovereignty, non-interference, and non-Western approaches to security. According to this narrative, China now seeks to reshape international governance, security, and development toward what it describes as an “orderly and equal multipolar world.”

She highlighted that these global

initiatives differ from the BRI in important ways. Most notably, they involve significantly less financial investment. Whereas the BRI relied heavily on large-scale funding and encouraged partner countries to contribute financially, the newer initiatives focus less on money and more on ideas, thus, offering alternative concepts for global governance and security architecture. For some countries, particularly in the Global South, she noted, these ideas may appear attractive and beneficial.

Turning to future implications, she warned that the adoption of Chinese narratives by other countries could have long-term consequences. She pointed to issues such as the promotion of the One China Principle as opposed to the One China Policy which could have significant implications for Taiwan. More broadly, she argued that these narratives have the potential to shape global governance frameworks as well as regional security concepts.

She concluded by noting that China is already expanding regional and international police cooperation, including through the export of security and surveillance technologies. Over the long term, this expansion carries the risk that China could gain greater political influence and play a decisive role in reshaping regional security structures and standards according to its own preferences, including in South Asia.

The second speaker, **John S. Van Oudenaren**, focused on how Chinese influence operations are being carried out in South Asia, with particular attention to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and China's use of Gwadar port as a strategic entry point into the Indian Ocean Region. He also noted that there was a distinction between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's newer global initiatives.

He began by situating developments in South Asia within broader changes in Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, describing the region as a "sort of springboard to a more globalized Chinese foreign policy that ultimately results in an unabashed case for global leadership." According to him, South Asia epitomizes this shift in three key ways:

- China's growing emphasis on diplomacy with the periphery, with the BRI serving as a unifying framework for this approach;
- China's intensified engagement with the Global South;
- China's increasing willingness to directly compete with the United States for global leadership, and the importance of South Asia in this competition.

He then examined how China's three global initiatives connect to the broader vision and how South Asia fits within them. Turning first to the Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in September 2021, he stressed that timing

is a critical factor in understanding all of China's initiatives. He argued, however, that the most significant strategic leap lies in the Global Security Initiative (GSI), particularly in how it relates to South Asia.

He explained that the GSI is built around the concept of "comprehensive" or "indivisible" security, which deliberately blurs the distinction between traditional and non-traditional security. This conceptual framework, he suggested, is often overlooked by Western analysts but is central to how China embeds its relationships with countries in the region. In some cases, this framework even allows China to engage with India, though in a highly differentiated manner.

He described this as a bifurcated strategy toward South Asia. On the one hand, China engages India as a potential partner in reshaping the Global South, primarily through multilateral platforms such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the United Nations, rather than through the three global initiatives themselves. On the other hand, the GSI underpins China's long-standing security relationships with countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. He noted, for example, that China accounts for nearly 75 percent of Bangladesh's arms purchases, making it a critical security partner. These relationships, he argued, enable smaller regional states to balance against India as the dominant regional power. We can see this is a very nuanced strategy and it starts



China accounts for nearly 75 percent of Bangladesh's arms purchases, making it a critical security partner. These relationships enable smaller regional states to balance against India as the dominant regional power. We can see this is a very nuanced strategy and it starts to take shape with the GSI.

– John S. Van Oudenaren

to take shape with the GSI. And we can see China having these kinds of regional security dialogues with other regions, such as ASEAN.

Turning to the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), he again emphasized the importance of timing. The initiative was announced in March 2023, when Beijing was pushing back on the Biden

administration's foreign policy of recommitting to the Liberal International Order. In conjunction with tensions over Taiwan, U.S. technology controls, the Russia-Ukraine war, and incidents such as the Chinese surveillance balloon, this contributed to friction and growing pushback from China. He argued that the GCI coincided with an intensified rhetorical campaign by China's foreign ministry against perceived U.S. hegemony, reflecting a consistent pattern in Chinese discourse.

Finally, he addressed the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), noting that its timing was also significant. He argued that it emerged at a moment when China sought to draw a clear contrast between its own vision of global leadership and that of the United States under the Trump administration, positioning itself as a more stable and responsible alternative within the evolving international order.

The next speaker, **Dr Jiayi Zhou**, continued the discussion by offering a more critical assessment of China's global initiatives, arguing that their scope and impact remain considerably more limited than Beijing would like to project.

She emphasized that the immediate international context is crucial for understanding China's current influence. This context, she argued, is characterized by a rapid decline of multilateralism and intensified stakeholder competition.

Many of China's engagements continue to take the form of bilateral mechanisms and long-standing regional forums, which are now being presented under more cohesive overarching narratives. However, she cautioned against conflating China's ability to package these activities rhetorically with its actual capacity to transform them into genuinely new or innovative initiatives.

Drawing a comparison with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), she recalled that the BRI initially emerged from two separate regional initiatives in Southeast Asia and Central Asia, which were later unified to provide coherence to China's existing overseas investment activities. When the BRI was announced in 2013, it initially attracted limited concern in the West, and it took several years before Western countries began to perceive it as a strategic challenge.

Turning to the Global Security Initiative (GSI), she noted that many of its core concepts closely resemble China's "new security concept" introduced in the late

1990s. Themes such as anti-hegemony, opposition to unilateralism, multipolarity, common security, and non-traditional security threats were already present in earlier Chinese discourse. At that time, however, these ideas generated little international attention. The key difference today, she argued, is that China now possesses significantly greater status and capacity on the global stage.

At the same time, she stressed that the policy documents associated with these initiatives remain highly vague, leaving substantial room for interpretation. While funding mechanisms are often referenced, the initiatives themselves are not particularly innovative in substance. A similar pattern applies to the GSI: despite the rhetoric: China is still not a substantial sort of military actor, power projector or security provider. In terms of accomplishments, they are not that indicative of a global power.

She compared China's role in security governance with that of smaller states, noting that countries such as Norway have, over the past two to three decades, facilitated near twice more peace agreements than China. While China can point to its involvement in mediating the Iran–Saudi Arabia agreement as a notable recent achievement, she cautioned against using participation or formal “sign-ups” to Chinese initiatives as a meaningful metric of long-term impact.



“The immediate context is also very important to understand China’s impact. The context is the rapid decline of multilateralism and stakeholder competition. However, the scope and impact of China’s global initiatives remain considerably more limited than Beijing would like to project.”

– Jiayi Zhou

The next speaker, **Professor Masayuki Masuda**, also emphasized the importance of timing in understanding China’s global initiatives. He noted that in 2021, Xi Jinping proposed the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative, situating the emergence of the three global initiatives within a broader political context shaped by the Biden administration and what Beijing perceives as a coalition of liberal international democracies.

Focusing on the Global Civilization Initiative, he observed that Xi Jinping places particular emphasis on concepts of humanity. While such discourse may appear gradual or understated, he argued that it is closely tied to the political timing of the Xi Jinping administration. He recalled that Xi had already introduced the idea of “reversal values” in 2014, emphasizing that each developing country should follow its own development agenda, values, and norms. At the time, this idea received limited attention in Chinese media. However, as the Biden administration increasingly foregrounded the liberal international order, Chinese media began to revive and amplify Xi’s earlier initiatives, framing them more explicitly as a counterweight to Western norms. In this regard, he stressed once again that timing is a critical factor.

He then provided broader background on the political discourse underpinning the three Chinese initiatives: Development,



“When Biden started talking more about liberal international order, Chinese media suddenly started talking about Xi Jinping’s former initiative and the anti-western type of a barrier. So the timing is very important in this regard.”

– Masayuki Masuda

Security, and Civilization, highlighting Xi Jinping’s articulation of “Chinese-style modernization” at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022 as a pivotal moment. During the Congress, Xi declared that a central task of the Chinese Communist Party was to advance the comprehensive rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization, explicitly positioning it as an alternative to Western models of development. This formulation,

he argued, laid the ideological foundation for China's distinct development path and reaffirmed the centrality of Party leadership.

According to Masuda, this framing significantly strengthened anti-Western narratives in both domestic politics and international diplomacy. He noted that in February 2023, Xi Jinping again sharply criticized Western models of modernization, arguing that Chinese modernization should not be equated with Westernization. Instead, China was presented as offering an alternative pathway to modernization, particularly for developing countries and regions. In this context, the linkage between Chinese-style modernization, the Global South, and developing countries has increasingly moved to the forefront of China's international discourse.

Turning to the Global Security Initiative (GSI), he observed that while Chinese authorities continue to monitor its implementation across different regions, South Asia is not a central arena for its application. In official Communist Party documents, the GSI is described as being "in progress," but it is rarely illustrated through detailed case studies involving South Asia. Greater attention, he noted, is instead given to Latin America, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific.

He concluded by arguing that although China is seeking more practical avenues for security cooperation in South Asia, deep-

seated regional dynamics, particularly China-India relations and India-Pakistan tensions, continue to constrain the effective implementation of the GSI. As a result, South Asia remains a challenging and secondary theater for China's security initiatives rather than a primary testing ground.

Dr. Scott N. Romaniuk, added several important contextual layers to the discussion, arguing that prevailing debates about China as a “rising power” are increasingly outdated. China, he asserted, has already risen; while it will continue to grow and develop, its arrival as a major power has already occurred. As such, China now behaves like any other state, or in other words, pursuing its own interests, which should not be seen as a surprising outcome.

He emphasized that China’s historical experience, particularly its past invasions by foreign powers, has left deep psychological and strategic scars. In this regard, the concept of ontological security is crucial for understanding Chinese state behavior. He further noted that the multipolarity of the early 20th century and the unipolarity of the post–Cold War era are historical exceptions rather than the norm. From this perspective, China’s aspiration to be part of a multipolar international system is both logical and historically consistent.

Geography, he argued, is another essential contextual factor. China does not share the same geographic advantages as the United States, and like all states, its strategic interests are shaped by its physical environment. While China and India benefit from having the world’s largest populations, these demographics also present significant governance and resource challenges.



“The GDI aligns closely with the BRI, and these projects are not just about roads and ports, but they are about reshaping various forms, instantiations of geography, social geography, cultural, political, and economic.”

– Scott N. Romaniuk

Another contextual point is that strategic state documents are intentionally vague around the world, not uniquely in China, designed to preserve flexibility in policy implementation.

Turning to South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, he stressed that China’s expanding role should not be understood as rhetorical, reactive, or purely economic. Rather, China’s activities are complementary, layered, and mutually reinforcing, and have been carefully

structured and targeted under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The three global initiatives, he argued, are not isolated diplomatic slogans but part of a broader, long-term strategic narrative.

He devoted particular attention to the idea of development, noting that while China is unlikely to prioritize the development of all states and communities equally, it is clearly advancing its own interests, something that should not be unexpected. Development projects, however, serve a crucial strategic function by creating access. This is especially important given China's geographic vulnerability to maritime chokepoints. He recalled former President Hu Jintao's reference to the "Malacca Dilemma", emphasizing that China's heavy reliance on energy imports heightens this concern. China consumes approximately 16 million barrels of oil per day while producing only around four million domestically, a gap that becomes even more consequential when military operations are factored in.

In this context, he argued that the Global Development Initiative (GDI) closely aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Infrastructure projects under these frameworks are not merely about roads and ports, but about reshaping geography in its multiple dimensions—social, cultural, political, and economic.

He highlighted the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a key example, noting its importance in

diversifying China's access routes to the sea and reducing reliance on the Malacca Strait. Similarly, China's long-term lease of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port was described as a deliberate strategic decision, providing China with a critical logistical foothold in the Indian Ocean.

Going back to geography and choke points, the CPEC corridor is very important to diversify China's access. It is surrounded by island chains and choke points, and there is an important opportunity for China to bridge its western border closer with access to the sea. It helps relieve its reliance on the Malacca Strait.

In Sri Lanka, the long-term lease of Hambantota port is very important - this is no accident and not it's not a clumsy decision to invest in a port. It gives China a very important logistical foothold in the Indian Ocean, not just any ocean, but a very unique ocean in in the world linking two spheres of where we live on this planet, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, all deep in economic dependence.

He further observed that countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives have become deeply economically dependent on China. While the projects in these countries are formally framed as commercial ventures, he emphasized their clear dual-use potential. Taken together, the GDI embeds China structurally within a broader maritime landscape, while the GSI complements this process by promoting principles such as sovereignty,

non-interference, and opposition to bloc politics. In doing so, the GSI challenges U.S.-led alliance systems in the Indo-Pacific, while simultaneously expanding China's defense engagement with countries including Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

GDI is embedding China structurally into a more broader maritime landscape. It is complemented by the GSI, which promotes sovereignty, non-interference, and opposition, block politics, etc. It is challenging the US-led alliance systems in the Indo-Pacific. It is quite vague, but at the same time its expanding China's defense engagement with different countries, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Many states expand their defense cooperations.

On the maritime front, he pointed to China's anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and the development of overseas bases, such as in Djibouti, as markers of China's transition from a traditionally continental power to a blue-water naval actor. These developments, he argued, reflect understandable and rational interests for a state of China's size and global exposure.

Returning to the Global Security Initiative, he noted that it also promotes respect for civilizational diversity and explicitly rejects Western claims to universalism. Taken together, he argued, China's global initiatives are converging to produce a broader narrative that seeks to reframe China not as an external hegemon, but as a fellow civilizational partner. This

narrative is reinforced through an emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference.

He added an important caveat, noting that China's military remains largely untested, as no senior Chinese military leaders or soldiers in recent generations have experienced a full-scale invasion or major war. This factor, he suggested, should also be considered when assessing China's strategic behavior.

He concluded by identifying a clear trajectory across the three initiatives:

- GDI secures economic footholds.
- GSI institutionalizes security engagements, albeit in a very broad and ambiguous way.
- And GCI legitimizes the broader, the broader scope of the project.

Q&A

Dr. Jagannath Panda proposed integrating the discussion with the Q&A into a streamlined, interactive session, allowing speakers to engage directly with the audience. The discussion opened with a first question on China's "open dialogues," specifically focusing on their effectiveness and how they have been received across the South Asian region. Additionally, the session examined the internal mechanics of the Chinese government, analyzing the roles of various state agencies and the specific influence they exert over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

John S. Van Oudenaren characterized South Asia as a region defined by a significant power disparity among its actors. He noted that while Pakistan attempts to counterbalance Indian influence, this dynamic lacks a direct parallel in Southeast Asia. Consequently, China's relationship with India and its neighbours is pivotal to maintaining a multipolar regional balance.

According to Mr. Van Oudenaren, China's primary objective is not necessarily to pull India and the EU into its own orbit, but rather to ensure they remain non-aligned with the United States. Regarding the role of government agencies, Van Oudenaren observed that all major policy actors are engaging with

these initiatives to secure a stake in the global security framework. However, he highlighted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a lead entity, bolstered by Wang Yi's close relationship with Xi Jinping. He identified the Ministry of State Security as a secondary but concurrent power, given its direct ties to leadership and specialized policy tools. Finally, he concluded that the PLA maintains strong influence in Asia by leveraging mid-level relationships and subsequently integrating them into broader global security initiatives.

Dr. Jagannath Panda then gave the floor to **Dr. Angela Stanzel**, who applied her expertise on Pakistan and South Asia to the question of institutional roles. Dr. Stanzel argued that China has historically pursued an asymmetrical relationship with its neighbors to maintain regional leverage, first over the United States and subsequently over India. This objective explains China's long-term investment in the Pakistani military, with for example its support for the country's nuclear projects.

However, she noted that several recent projects have failed to gain momentum, resulting in significant inefficiencies. Dr. Stanzel identified two primary obstacles: systemic corruption and persistent security concerns. Despite Pakistan's economic dependence on China, these

unresolved issues have rendered many investments unprofitable. Nevertheless, China's announcement of its largest-ever single investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) underscores her argument that Beijing views Pakistan as a vital geostrategic asset rather than a purely economic one. To further this point, she highlighted the disproportionately strong involvement of the Ministry of State Security in Pakistani initiatives compared to the more limited role of the Ministry of Commerce.

She concluded that Pakistan is a unique and indispensable pillar of the China-centric network, offering key advantages such as a reduced reliance on the Strait of Malacca.

Dr. Jiayi Zhou rounded up the discussion by addressing the role of various agencies and the broad Chinese initiatives shaping behavior in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Dr. Zhou first clarified that her previous remarks were not intended to dismiss China's regional activities as insignificant or non-strategic; she was instead addressing the new added value of the recent documents.

In her view, these initiatives demonstrate a new coherence, where China's commercial, diplomatic, and geostrategic interests are finally converging into a unified framework. Regarding the complexity of Chinese bureaucracy, Dr. Zhou challenged the perception of China as a monolithic entity. She pointed to

recurring internal frictions and competing interests between different agencies and actors. Interestingly, she argued that the inherent vagueness of these policies is actually a strategic advantage, as it allows various stakeholders to "pitch in" and adapt the initiatives to suit their needs.

In her concluding remarks, Dr. Zhou characterized China as a "lonely superpower" with few meaningful military alliances, even a close partner like Pakistan lacks a true military. Consequently, China utilizes strategic investments to create a conducive environment for its interests through a diverse web of relationships. She reminded the audience that this pursuit of interest is standard behavior for all states, regardless of their size.

Ultimately, she noted that these initiatives serve to create new markets for smaller nations, offering them significant economic opportunities.

Moving to the second question, Dr. Jagannath Panda asked **Dr. Scott N. Romaniuk** whether the "String of Pearls" concept remains a relevant framework for understanding China's new global initiatives. Dr. Romaniuk explained that two competing narratives dominate this topic: China's own discourse regarding its national interests, and a counter-narrative that views these initiatives as a deliberate attempt to encircle India and contain its powerful neighbors.

While acknowledging the validity of both perspectives, Dr. Romaniuk provided

historical context, noting that China has traditionally functioned as a continental power, focusing primarily on border security and internal stability. However, as the Chinese economy expanded, it became increasingly dependent on global trade and energy imports, pushing maritime security to the forefront of Beijing's strategic priorities. Dr. Romaniuk argued that this natural shift in interest has often been framed by outsiders as a containment strategy against India. In his view, the Indian Ocean was destined to become a Chinese priority due to its role in connecting global spheres and its numerous strategic chokepoints. He concluded that analysts should move away from the "String of Pearls" label and instead view China's actions through the lens of its evolving national interests and fundamental resource needs.

The third question, directed to **Professor Masayuki Masuda**, sought his perspective on whether the Quad nations (Japan, Australia, India, and the United States) could offer a viable alternative connectivity model. Professor Masuda's initial response from a Japanese perspective was a definitive "no." He explained that while Japan seeks to avoid overdependence on China, its primary focus under the Takaichi administration is the introduction of a rigorous economic security agenda. This involves a strategic review of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) initiative to include not

only Southeast Asian nations but also South Asian partners like Bangladesh and India.

However, Professor Masuda clarified that while the Quad remains essential from a broad security standpoint, Japan's current priority is economic capacity rather than mere capacity building. He argued that the success of these initiatives ultimately depends on the extent to which India and other South Asian nations align with and respond to the specific anti-coercion and economic security measures set forth in the Japanese agenda.

Dr. Panda transitioned to the fourth question, which explored the merits of a regional approach to Chinese partnerships in South Asia and the extent to which external actors either collaborate with or challenge Beijing. **Dr. Romaniuk** argued that both the regional and individual state levels are essential for a complete analysis.

On one hand, because all states are driven by their own national interests, they must critically assess how frameworks like the Global Security Initiative (GSI) affect their autonomy. Given South Asia's diverse landscape of states, Dr. Romaniuk suggested that the primary lens for individual cooperation should be an evaluation of coercion and inducement, specifically questioning who will lead the joint efforts and what the resulting power dynamic will look like. On the other hand, the second part of the GSI talks about dialogue and discussion with different

regions, which is where Dr. Romaniuk believes we should look at it from a regional level. The focus then shifts toward comprehensiveness and “non-traditional” security threats that transcend national borders. Dr. Romaniuk emphasized that issues such as food security and climate change require a unified regional response.

Professor Masuda observed that while both the Japanese and U.S. governments have increasingly prioritized the Global South, China has proactively sought a leadership role within the region. Despite sharing the same concept of the Global South, Professor Masuda explained that establishing synergy between Beijing and Tokyo remains a significant challenge.

For instance, as Japan expands its security cooperation with South Asian countries, notably through frameworks like Official Security Assistance (OSA), Beijing frequently perceives these moves as direct countermeasures designed to check its influence. Furthermore, Professor Masuda argued that transparency remains a non-negotiable condition for Japan and Western nations to even consider supporting Chinese-led initiatives. Ultimately, so long as Beijing continues to view Japanese and Western outreach as hostile containment strategies, the potential for constructive synergy between these competing regional models remains low.

Dr. Jiayi Zhou commented on Professor Masuda’s points, noting that initiatives from external actors were

largely implemented as a direct response to China’s expanding strategic engagement worldwide. She cited the G7’s Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), the EU’s Global Gateway, and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) as prime examples of frameworks established to counterbalance Chinese influence. While Dr. Zhou acknowledged the lack of natural avenues for direct engagement with China through these models, she argued that this competition has a net positive impact on the smaller states that serve as their primary subjects.

According to Dr. Zhou, this rivalry brings increased global attention, interest, and funding to these nations. She pointed to the Biden administration’s global infrastructure initiatives as a clear attempt to offer a superior alternative to Chinese projects, describing this dynamic as a “race to the top.” While she cautioned that such competition has escalatory dimensions that require careful management to prevent smaller powers from being overwhelmed, she maintained that the “race” generally elevates standards and opportunities.

Dr. Zhou said that while the risk of small states being “crushed” by great power friction is real, she believes there is still significant strategic space for middle powers like Japan and the European Union to introduce their own impactful initiatives.

Mr. Van Oudenaren continued the

discussion by analyzing the broader regional dynamics, specifically pushing back against the earlier suggestion that Chinese leadership in the Indian Ocean is unlikely. He argued that Beijing is systematically “pulling on normative threads” and challenging established geostrategic realities, operating under the philosophy that “if they build it, they will come.”

Central to Van Oudenaren’s argument is the relative decline of U.S. focus in the region. He noted that while the “Asia-Pacific” has been a topic of discussion in Washington for over fifteen years, the current prioritization of U.S. foreign policy tells a different story. With urgent attention directed toward Latin America, the Middle East (specifically Iran), and the conflict in Ukraine, the Asia-Pacific effectively slips to fourth place in terms of immediate administrative focus. He warned that unless the United States can bridge the gap between its rhetoric and its actual regional presence, China will essentially be “knocking on an open door.”

He concluded that even without a significant shift in U.S. focus, the Indo-Pacific will continue to rank second or third in practical importance, allowing China to advance its regional influence.

Shifting the focus to a European perspective, **Dr. Angela Stanzel** addressed the prevailing Western narrative that Europe has “lost” the Global South. She explained that because China has spent

decades cultivating strategic partnerships, Europe is currently in a “catch-up” phase.

Dr. Stanzel warned that China and Russia have already successfully embedded narratives within the Global South that Beijing can leverage for support on international platforms, noting that each of these nations holds an equal vote at the United Nations. Germany’s recent diplomatic outreach to South Pacific islands serves as a clear example of Europe’s effort to secure influence within these international organizations. Dr. Stanzel observed that while many developing nations now realize that Chinese investments have not always met expectations, they remain attractive because they typically come with “no strings attached.” In contrast, European investments are often perceived as carrying “double standards” due to their associated political conditions. Ultimately, she argued that European success depends on finding a balance between a principled and pragmatic foreign policy.

She noted that any deepening of relationships with South Asian states would likely result from China’s own aggressive regional behavior rather than a sudden surge in European attractiveness. Finally, Dr. Stanzel emphasized the need to monitor the transformation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it shifts from traditional infrastructure into high-tech sectors, such as the Space and Information Corridor.

In the concluding segment of the first “Silk Cage” webinar, **Dr. Panda** raised a critical question regarding which South Asian nations are most vital to China’s security and foreign policy. **Dr. Romaniuk** argued that Pakistan may not be China’s primary regional priority, citing its persistent internal instability. He contended that while profitability matters, China prioritizes long-term stability. Instead, Dr. Romaniuk highlighted Singapore for its proximity to the Strait of Malacca, and Sri Lanka for its strategic potential as a host for territory and bases.

Dr. Zhou offered a counter-perspective, suggesting that “problematic” or unstable states can indeed be strategic priorities for Beijing. She reminded the panel that even small or volatile actors hold equal voting power at the United Nations.

Dr. Zhou further observed that China itself may still be in the process of defining its primary regional hierarchy. She identified this as a core challenge for the Global Security Initiative (GSI): while Western frameworks are often accused of double standards, many regional states similarly view the GSI’s rhetoric as lacking credibility due to their own internal concerns.

Professor Masuda framed China’s global initiatives as an attempt to appeal to the Global South as a counterbalance to its deteriorating reputation in East Asia. He noted that China’s narrative in its immediate neighborhood is increasingly

defensive, shaped by tensions in Taiwan and the South China Sea. Consequently, Beijing must develop a positive narrative for developing nations to offset the negative perceptions held by external actors.

Professor Masuda suggested that China’s future success will depend on its ability to balance these conflicting regional identities.

Finally, **Mr. Van Oudenaren** emphasized that Beijing maintains a deep, institutionalized relationship with the Pakistani military, utilizing the Chief of Army Staff, who largely directs foreign policy, to maintain a strategic balance against India. He also identified Bangladesh as a key partner for China as it seeks to diversify away from Indian dominance.

He noted that China is already “ahead of the curve” by investing in the future middle classes and markets of these countries, viewing them as long-term economic and geostrategic assets.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Large-scale distinct but interconnected roles of China's three global initiatives**

The Global Development Initiative (GDI) is primarily linked to infrastructure connectivity and development cooperation. The Global Security Initiative (GSI), by contrast, focuses on regional stability and security engagement, while the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) emphasizes what China presents as an alternative model of governance, including opposition to external intervention.

- **A normative narrative centered on sovereignty and pluralism**

Across all three initiatives, the Chinese narrative stresses sovereignty, cultural pluralism, and normative discourse, while simultaneously promoting an alternative framework for global governance that challenges Western liberal models.

- **The importance of timing in understanding China's global initiatives**

The launch and promotion of the initiatives are closely tied to shifts in the international environment, including U.S. foreign policy, debates over the liberal international order, and broader geopolitical tensions.

- **Strategic ambiguity as a defining feature**

The official documents associated with the GDI, GSI, and GCI remain deliberately vague, leaving substantial room for interpretation and flexible application across regions. This ambiguity allows China to adapt the initiatives to different political, security, and regional contexts.

- **The central role of media and discourse production**

Chinese state media play a key role in reviving, amplifying, and reframing initiatives depending on the international political climate.

- **A gap between narrative ambition and practical implementation**

While the initiatives project China as a development provider, security partner, and normative power, their concrete impact varies significantly across regions.

- **Geography as a strategic factor**

China's geographic realities—including its landlocked western regions, reliance on maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait, and proximity to the Indian Ocean—strongly influence the design and prioritization of its initiatives. Infrastructure and maritime projects are closely tied to ensuring energy security, access to key trade routes, and strategic flexibility in the region.



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