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China's Global Initiatives: Limited Reach, Strategic Openings in the Indian Ocean

Jiayi Zhou

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Fragmentation of the global, multilateral order is visible even in the range of purportedly cooperative initiatives on offer by great powers, which represent competing and alternative systems, (counter-) narratives, and poles of influence. This includes the several "global" initiatives that China has put forward over the past several years—the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) among them. Intensified stakeholder competition limits the scope and impact of these initiatives, but also provides entry points for influence among smaller states. This is visible in the Indian Ocean Region, which has diverse local and extra-regional interests at play, and where China's initiatives are one among a growing gamut of regional and extra-regional offerings for developmental and security partnerships. The main challenge will be to channel these competing economic, development, and security models towards a "race to the top" that enhances rather than erodes small-state development, security, and sovereignty.

The decline of multilateralism and the rise of great power unilateralism mark a global order in growing disarray. China is part and parcel of this wider geopolitical fragmentation, despite its rhetoric and perhaps genuine ambitions to the contrary: it is a party to maritime tensions in its near neighborhood, and a main actor in increasingly sharp geostrategic competition. It is in this context, of universal rules and norms arguably at a three-decade low, that China's new "global"-level diplomatic offerings—the Global Security Initiative (GSI) [全球安全倡议], the Global Development Initiative (GDI) [全球发展倡议], the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) [全球文明倡议], and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) [全球治理倡议]—need to be understood and evaluated.

Despite being couched in language encouraging the adoption of new frameworks for principled

state behavior, these Chinese initiatives are themselves part of the growth in competing and alternative systems, counter-narratives, and offerings of an era of intensified stakeholder competition. Limitations of China's universalisms are particularly evident in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This region has broad global significance for maritime connectivity, commerce, and security, but lacks effective overarching regional frameworks to cohesively manage associated developmental and security challenges. The region comprises diverse powers, both smaller and larger, each jockeying for its own interests. As this issue brief argues, it is highly unlikely these new Chinese initiatives will provide the foundation for such a framework—nor do they suggest that China will effectively become a dominant security or developmental provider, in this region or globally for that matter. Homing in on the GSI and GDI, however, these initiatives do offer additional opportunity for smaller and middle powers in the region to engage in strategic hedging, as they navigate much more complex, uncertain, and turbulent global politics.

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The GSI and GDI, two of the more prominent of the Chinese initiatives, were announced separately by President Xi Jinping in 2021 and 2023. While they represent evidence of China's global leadership ambitions and a much more assertive foreign policy, the two initiatives themselves do not represent substantively new approaches, or innovations, to existing Chinese foreign development and security principles, or behavior. The GSI reiterates many of the same conceptual framings that China had already articulated more than two decades ago in its "New Security Concept." Introduced in the late 1990s, the New Security Concept contained much of the same terminology as the GSI, of "common" and "cooperative" forms of security, on both traditional and non-traditional topics. It also mentioned setting aside the "Cold War mentality" in favor of mutual benefits, towards security for humanity at large.[1] However, unlike with the GSI, those ideas at the time received very little attention from the international community.

The GDI focuses on many broad principles, normative frameworks, and even targets that pre-exist in the form of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Putting separate Chinese branding on these ideas suggests, in part, that China holds the existing multilateral development system in high regard.[2] Indeed, China's overseas footprint is by no means that of a hegemon that can wholly redefine or reorder existing global rules and norms. In terms of global development, China has since 2017 been the world's largest creditor and is setting the pace and standard for financing in low-income states. In terms of stricter development assistance, however, Chinese aid remains very small in relative terms compared to traditional donors.[3] Chinese development assistance amounted to only several billion USD

in 2025, compared to the 174.3 billion by OECD countries in 2025, even after substantial cuts in aid budgets.[4]

It is true that OECD countries' approaches to development have begun to shift to a more Chinese-style emphasis on large-scale strategic and commercial investments.[5] However, China has meanwhile been shifting towards "small and beautiful" projects in low-income countries—replicating principles of inclusive localization that are by no means an innovation on existing OECD-DAC development assistance principles. This again indicates that China would be hard-pressed to independently define, let alone uphold, any truly new or alternative order in the development sphere.

In the security realm, China remains a regionally limited security actor and is still growing into its role as a global peacemaker and security provider. While its brokering of the Iran-Saudi Arabia deal has been hailed as "proof of concept" of the GSI, it is important not to overstate how much China is able to achieve unilaterally.[6] China is, for instance, the least prolific signatory of peace agreements among all permanent members of the UN Security Council. Since the end of the Cold War, even Norway has been signatory to twice as many peace agreements as has China.[7] Indeed, China mostly engages in what some scholars refer to as only "quasi-mediation diplomacy," which emphasizes rhetoric and symbolism over hard commitments.[8] This also marks the GSI more broadly, whose vagueness is matched by its requirements for country signatories or supporters—requiring no costs, and no hard choices. While this indicates on the one hand, some genuine inclusiveness to the GSI, it also limits its practical value.

Importantly, however, there is no international institutional architecture connected to these initiatives, which more than anything speaks to their limits. Global consternation and attention to these initiatives, therefore, are with regards not to genuine changes in China's foreign security and development policies, but to China's overall geopolitical clout, capacity, and footprint—which are admittedly as powerful as ever before.

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Hence both the GSI and GDI are more or less elaborations of pre-existing platforms of Chinese cooperation. The documents comprise a laundry list of China's activities, mechanisms, funds, and dialogue forums with various states and regions of the world, including regional and multilateral organizations. These are being retroactively subsumed into the GSI and GDI framework, but very few if any of these are new dedicated mechanisms that represent a change or pivot to China's approach. Such retroactive marketing is similar to the method deployed by China with regards to existing overseas investment activities and the BRI. Where new platforms have been established, for example, the Group of Friends of the GDI within the UN framework, the resources deployed and results obtained have been modest in scale.

The limits of China's global initiatives are even more pronounced when homing in on a region such as the IOR. Notably, the IOR and South Asia are not featured in the text of either the GDI or the GSI, though both texts extensively elaborate on China's cooperation with various regions of the world—from Latin America, to Africa, to Central Asia and the ASEAN region. In fact, the IOR was not even originally a target region of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) when it was announced in 2013. The BRI emerged from two separate regional Chinese initiatives, in Southeast Asia and Central Asia, which were later merged and expanded into the current umbrella framework for China's overseas investment activities.[9]

This does not suggest that the region does not hold special significance for China; the IOR has long been a matter of strategic attention for its policymakers due to the so-called Malacca dilemma: the vulnerabilities of the sea lines of communications (SLOC) that are essential for delivering China's supplies of critical resources.[10] There has been an increasingly robust Chinese presence in the IOR, combining China's overseas development financing with its security interests. Strategic access through combined land- and maritime-based corridors is facilitated by the strategic influence it has cultivated through both economic partnerships as well as growing security ties to states like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—all of which have also signed on to China's GSI. However, the IOR is by no means China's primary strategic maritime theater, nor an area where China can call any shots unilaterally. Despite the expansion of China's naval presence and access along ports in the IOR region, it has no formalized military basing agreement with any country—including Pakistan.

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More to the point, China's strategic influence is as much a product of the interests of the states involved, as it is a product of its own power projection. To reiterate, rhetorical support for Chinese initiatives—particularly for the smaller powers in the region—costs very little. On the other hand, China also provides a hedging opportunity for smaller states like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. These states have long attempted to secure a degree of autonomy against more powerful states, including through occasionally hedging them against each other.[11] Such states are of course also beset by internal fragmentation as well as external pressures, in addition to economic weaknesses that makes them vulnerable to external pressure. This was one of the main factor's underpinning concerns around China's "debt-trap diplomacy." However, such concerns often understate the interests and agency of local actors, as often discussed in the case of Sri Lanka's long-term leasing of its Port of Hambantota to China.[12]

Indeed, for smaller powers, Chinese initiatives are only one in a growing gamut of offerings,

including investment vehicles and security partnerships to choose from. These comprise India's "Neighborhood First" policies, including through its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and more recent Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) initiatives, as well as the strategic initiatives of extra-regional actors. such as Japan, the United States, and even the European Union.[13] Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative, an outreach platform to smaller states of the region with a strong infrastructural focus, remains an important priority for the new Takaichi government.[14] The EU's Global Gateway is another vehicle through which smaller states as well as India are creating alternative political and economic channels in the region.[15]

Notably, in an increasingly uncertain and turbulent global landscape, it is not only small states but even major powers that are trying to maximize strategic autonomy. This includes India: its concerns about China's growing presence in its region, and cooperation with extra-regional powers in the Quad format, sit alongside India's desire to also participate in and support alternative, non-Western, institutions and frameworks—such as BRICS and the SCO—in which China is an important participant.

In short, China's GDI and GSI frameworks are not an indication of, nor a lead-in to, status as a hegemon—neither in the South Asia region nor globally. Indeed, one main barrier to China's ambitions of providing and championing a truly "global" framework for development and security is that it has not been able to extricate itself from power politics, neither in its immediate neighborhood nor with other great powers. China is itself part of difficult and even escalating security dilemmas in the East and South China Seas and in the IOR, as well as in great power competition with the U.S. This suggests that, rather than being a standard bearer for cooperative security, China in many ways remains a partisan stakeholder. This significantly lessens the credibility of China's rhetoric regarding "taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously."[16]

Seen in this context, China's global initiatives are simply part of the growing diversity of frameworks on offer as regional and global competition intensifies. This is par for the course of a much more contested and congested global order, one that can still serve the benefit of smaller states able to navigate the geopolitical winds in favor of their own interests. The main challenge will be to channel these competing economic, development and security models towards a "race to the top" than enhances rather than erodes small-state development, security, and sovereignty.

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Author –

Dr. Jiayi Zhou *is a Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), working on research topics at the intersection of geopolitics and sustainable development. She has held fellowship positions with, among others, the Kennan Institute of the Wilson Center, the Bank of Finland's Institute of Transition Economics (BOFIT), Pacific Forum CSIS, and the Stanford US-Russia Forum. She holds a PhD in Environmental Science from Linköping University.*

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Endnotes

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