China's Global Security Initiative and Global Development Initiative: A Challenge to the US-led Global Order

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ABSTRACT

This research paper argues that China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI), conceptualized holistically as the Global Security and Development Initiative (GSDI), constitute a sophisticated and systemic counter-hegemonic project on the part of China that is fundamentally challenging the ideational and institutional foundations of the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO). Moving beyond mere power transition theory, it posits GSDI as a systemic effort to construct an alternative paradigm of global governance predicated on principles like absolute sovereignty, non-interference, indivisible security, and development as the cornerstone of stability, and a rejection of universalist liberal norms. Drawing on realist, liberal institutionalist, and power transition theories, the paper dissects the conceptual underpinnings of GSDI, contrasting its "harmony-focused" approach with the West's "rules-based" system. It analyzes the initiative's concrete manifestations through diplomatic engagement, institutional creation such as SCO, BRICS+ expansion, and development finance notably the Belt and Road Initiative, assessing its resonance, particularly in the Global South. Crucially, the paper evaluates the tangible impact of GSDI on existing international institutions, norms, and the strategic calculus of major powers. By synthesizing the perspectives of leading scholars and analyzing empirical evidence, this research concludes that GSDI constitutes a profound systemic challenge, not merely seeking a larger role within the established order but actively reshaping its very edifice towards a more pluralistic, contested, and potentially fragmented global system. Thus, leading to a preposition that the era of uncontested Western dominance is yielding to an age of competing paradigms.

Keywords: Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Liberal International Order (LIO), Indivisible Security, SCO, BRICS+

INTRODUCTION: A CONTESTED VISION FOR GLOBAL ORDER

The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed not merely the rise of China as an economic and military powerhouse, but the articulation of a fundamentally distinct vision for organizing international relations. Emerging from a world shaped decisively by Western, primarily American, powers and the tenets of the liberal international order – characterized by democratic promotion, multilateral institutions, free markets, and rules-based dispute resolution. China, on the other hand, presents an alternative blueprint. The Global Security Initiative (GSI), formally proposed in 2022, and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in 2021, constitute the twin pillars of this ambitious project, analyzed holistically as the Global Security and Development Initiative (GSDI). This framework is far more than a collection of policy pronouncements; it represents a concerted effort to recalibrate the foundational principles and power structures of global governance.[1]

The post-1945 order, despite its imperfections and evolving nature, established a predictable, if often contested, framework for international interaction. Its institutions – the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) – and its normative emphasis on human rights and collective security, reflected a specific constellation of power and ideology.[2] However,

the perceived overreach of liberal interventionism as in cases like Iraq 2003, Libya 2012, coupled with the 2008 financial crisis undermining faith in neoliberal economics, and the perceived neglect of developing world priorities fostered fertile ground for alternative narratives.[3] It is within this context of perceived Western institutional stagnation and normative disillusionment that China's GSDI gains significant traction. As Kishore Mahbubani argues, the West has suffered a "loss of strategic wisdom," failing to recognize the profound shift in global sentiment and the legitimate desire of non-Western states for greater agency and respect for diverse political models.[4]

GSDI explicitly positions itself as an antidote to the perceived failings and hypocrisies of the existing system. It champions absolute sovereignty and non-interference as sacrosanct, rejects the universality of liberal democratic values in favor of "civilizational diversity," promotes the concept of "indivisible security" (rejecting bloc alliances perceived as targeting specific states), and places state-led development at the heart of achieving lasting stability.[5] This stands in stark contrast to the liberal order's emphasis on conditional sovereignty, humanitarian intervention (in theory, if not always in practice), universal human rights, alliance systems like NATO, and market-driven development often coupled with political conditionalities. Henry Kissinger, reflecting on the historical patterns of power shifts, noted that emerging powers invariably seek to reshape the international system to reflect their own experiences and values, a dynamic clearly at play with China and GSDI.[6]

This paper contends that GSDI represents a profound and systemic challenge to the US-led global order. It is not merely an attempt to gain greater influence within the existing framework, but an effort to establish parallel structures, redefine core norms, and ultimately construct a more pluralistic – and fragmented – international system where Chinese principles hold significant sway. Graham Allison's analysis of the "Thucydides Trap" underscores the inherent dangers when a rising power threatens to displace an established one;[7] GSDI represents China's attempt to navigate this perilous dynamic by offering an alternative governance model, seeking to avoid direct military confrontation while steadily eroding the pillars of Western dominance. Fareed Zakaria's concept of "the rise of the rest" captures the broader context, but GSDI provides China with a specific, coherent ideological and institutional toolkit to channel this diffuse energy and reshape the system in its preferred image.[8]

The following sections will delve into the conceptual architecture of GSDI, trace its operationalization through diplomacy and institution-building, analyze its resonance and impact, particularly in the Global South, and assess its tangible effects on the existing global order. By engaging with key thinkers and empirical evidence, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how China's GSDI is actively recasting the contours of 21st-century global politics.

Architecting a Post-Hegemonic International Order

The unveiling of China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI)—strategically fused as the Global Security and Development Initiative (GSDI)—marks Beijing's most audacious bid to reconfigure the ontological pillars of the US-led liberal international order (LIO).[9] Far beyond mere geopolitical posturing, GSDI represents a coherent, civilization-centric vision that exploits the LIO's contradictions while offering the Global South an illiberal alternative to Western hegemony. This paper examines how GSDI's conceptual architecture, operationalized through parallel institutions and transactional diplomacy, fractures the existing order by amplifying postcolonial grievances and legitimizing authoritarian governance models.

Civilizational Sovereignty: The Bedrock of Non-Interference and Pluralism

At its core, GSDI advances a neo-Westphalian ethos that privileges civilizational sovereignty over individual rights and developmental legitimacy over democratic accountability. The GSI's foundational document explicitly rejects humanitarian intervention as a "pretext for undermining sovereign states," framing non-interference as the sacrosanct guarantor of stability. This doctrine echoes political philosopher Yan Xuetong's

"moral realism," which contends that states derive authority from cultural authenticity rather than liberal social contracts. Simultaneously, the GDI divorces economic progress from political freedoms, promoting state-led infrastructure as the engine of "common prosperity"—a direct challenge to the Washington Consensus's market fundamentalism.[10] As economist Justin Yifu observes, this "heterodox development"[11] model exploits the Global South's disillusionment with austerity prescriptions, offering "policy space" denied by Bretton Woods institutions. GSDI thus weaponizes the LIO's normative overreach—from Iraq to Libya—to position China as the defender of civilizational pluralism.

Developmental Security: Stability Through State-led Prosperity

GSDI fundamentally redefines the relationship between security and development, placing state-led development at the epicenter of achieving lasting stability – a concept termed "developmental security." This pillar, primarily articulated through the GDI, asserts that true security cannot be achieved without addressing root causes like poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. However, it diverges sharply from the LIO's approach by divorcing development from political liberalization and emphasizing state control over market forces and Western-defined "good governance."[12]

The GDI Concept Paper emphasizes "people-centered development," "benefits for all," and "partnership for development," but crucially avoids prescriptions for political systems. It promotes "innovation-driven growth" and "stronger, greener, and healthier global development," primarily through large-scale, state-directed infrastructure projects epitomized by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This model prioritizes tangible economic outputs (ports, railways, power plants) delivered through inter-governmental agreements, bypassing conditionalities often attached to Western aid or International Financial Institution (IFI) loans. As Dani Rodrik argues in Straight Talk on Trade, developing nations often require "policy space" for heterodox approaches suited to their specific contexts, challenging the one-size-fits-all Washington Consensus. GSDI leverages this critique, positioning itself as offering this needed flexibility without intrusive political demands. Deborah Brautigam's extensive research on China in Africa, while challenging simplistic "debt-trap" narratives, highlights how China's "no-strings-attached" approach (focusing on commercial viability rather than governance reforms) appeals to governments chafing under Western conditionalities.[13]

Conceptually, "developmental security" posits that economic progress, delivered through state-capitalist models, creates the social stability and regime legitimacy that underpins national and, by extension, regional and global security. Poverty and underdevelopment are seen as the primary seeds of conflict and extremism. Therefore, investing in infrastructure-led growth is not just economic policy but a core security strategy. This contrasts with the LIO's tendency to compartmentalize security often addressed through alliances and military means and development, addressed through aid and governance reforms. GSDI integrates them, arguing that development, achieved through its preferred state-centric model, is the foundation of security. This framework implicitly legitimizes authoritarian developmental states by prioritizing outcomes (growth, stability) over processes (democracy, human rights). It appeals directly to governments in the Global South seeking rapid modernization without political liberalization pressures.[14]

Indivisible Security: Rejecting Alliances and Embracing Common Fate

The security dimension of GSDI's architecture is crystallized in the principle of "indivisible security." This concept, prominently featured in the GSI, asserts that the security of one state cannot be achieved at the expense of others. It explicitly rejects the logic of military alliances – particularly those perceived as targeting specific nations, like NATO or the Quad – as inherently destabilizing and relics of a Cold War mentality. Instead, it promotes "common security,"[15] emphasizing dialogue, consultation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes through mechanisms that respect all parties' "legitimate security concerns."

The GSI Concept Paper states: "One country's security should not come at the expense of the security of other countries."[16] It advocates for resolving conflicts through "dialogue and consultation" and opposes "the pursuit of one's own security at the cost of others' security." This directly challenges the collective defense

principle enshrined in alliances like NATO (Article 5) and the US bilateral alliance system in Asia. China frames these alliances as exclusionary, provocative, and generators of security dilemmas, pointing to NATO expansion as a root cause of the Ukraine conflict. John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system driving states towards competition and security maximization that threatens others, provides a theoretical underpinning for why China views US alliances as threatening. GSDI's "indivisible security" offers a counter-narrative rooted in a more cooperative, albeit state-centric, vision.

Operationally, "indivisible security" promotes security governance through inclusive, consensus-based platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where China plays a leading role alongside Russia and Central Asian states. It favors "comprehensive security" approaches that address non-traditional threats (terrorism, piracy, climate change, pandemics) through functional cooperation rather than military blocs. This concept implicitly delegitimizes the US alliance network while positioning China as a responsible stakeholder offering an alternative, less confrontational security framework. It resonates with non-aligned states wary of being caught in great power rivalries and appeals to a desire for a multipolar security order less dominated by a single hegemon. However, critics argue it serves to constrain US power projection and shield China (and allies like Russia) from collective action in response to actions violating international norms, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine or China's actions in the South China Sea, under the guise of respecting "legitimate security concerns" and opposing "interference."

Normative Pluralism: Contesting Universalism and Promoting "Shared Values"

Integral to GSDI's architecture is the assertion of normative pluralism – the rejection of universalist claims, particularly regarding liberal democracy and human rights, in favor of recognizing diverse value systems and political models as equally valid. This directly confronts a central pillar of the LIO: the belief in the progressive universalization of liberal democratic norms. GSDI documents consistently emphasize "the diversity of civilizations" and the right of countries to "independently choose social systems and development paths."[17] It promotes "common values of humanity" – peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, freedom – but deliberately interprets these terms differently from the liberal tradition. "Democracy" is framed as "whole-process people's democracy" within existing political structures, not multiparty electoral competition. "Freedom" emphasizes freedom from external coercion and the right to development, not primarily individual political or civil liberties.

China's Strategic Leveraging of SCO, BRICS+, and ADB to Advance GSDI Principles

The Global Spatial Data Infrastructure (GSDI) concept represents a powerful vision: a world where geographic information is readily accessible, interoperable, and utilized for sustainable development, environmental stewardship, and effective governance. Its core principles – including interoperability, data sharing, standardization, institutional collaboration, capacity building, and supporting societal goals – provide a blueprint for harnessing the power of location-based data. For the People's Republic of China (PRC), actively promoting and expanding GSDI principles is not merely a technical endeavor; it is a strategically calibrated component of its broader geopolitical, economic, and technological ambitions. China leverages key multilateral institutions, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the expanded BRICS grouping (often termed BRICS+), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as critical platforms to propagate its vision of digital and geospatial governance, advance its standards, and solidify its leadership role in the Global South.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): Securing the Eurasian Heartland

The SCO, initially focused on security and border stability in Central Asia, has evolved into a significant platform for broader economic and technological cooperation, heavily influenced by China and Russia. For GSDI advancement, China leverages the SCO through several key mechanisms aligned with core principles.

China aggressively promotes the adoption of its BeiDou satellite navigation system within SCO member and observer states. This directly advances the GSDI principle of interoperability by establishing BDS as a foundational positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) infrastructure for the region.[18] Projects involve establishing BDS ground stations across member states, providing technical assistance, and integrating BDS into national spatial data infrastructures (SDIs). As Xiangming Chen and Curtis Stone note, "China's promotion of BDS internationally, particularly through platforms like the SCO, represents a strategic move to reduce dependence on GPS and establish a competing technological standard with significant geopolitical implications". This creates a sphere of technical interoperability centered on Chinese technology.

While full open data sharing (a key GSDI aspiration) is constrained by national security concerns prevalent among SCO members (including China itself), the organization facilitates controlled data sharing frameworks. These focus on areas of mutual interest like border management, counter-terrorism, disaster response, and environmental monitoring (e.g., transboundary water resources). China often provides the technological backbone (platforms, analytics) for these initiatives. As Mher D. Sahakyan observes, "The SCO serves as a platform for China to advance its model of 'secure data sharing,' where collaboration occurs within state-sanctioned frameworks prioritizing sovereignty and regime security, aligning closely with Beijing's domestic digital governance approach." This advances a specific interpretation of the GSDI data sharing principle, heavily weighted towards sovereign control.

Besides, China funds and leads numerous SCO initiatives focused on building geospatial capacity. This includes training programs for officials and technicians from member states, often conducted in China or via Chinese experts deployed regionally. Joint research projects on geospatial applications for agriculture, resource management, and urban planning are common. These efforts directly address the GSDI principles of institutional collaboration and capacity building, while simultaneously fostering goodwill and creating networks dependent on Chinese expertise and technology. As Li Mingjiang points out, "China's capacity-building efforts in the SCO context are not purely altruistic; they are investments in creating a cohort of regional elites familiar with and often reliant on Chinese systems and norms."[19]

BRICS+: Forging a Multipolar Geopolitical World

The expansion of BRICS in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (creating BRICS+) significantly amplified the grouping's geographic and economic reach. China, as the largest economy within BRICS+, actively uses this platform to advance a multipolar vision of global governance, including in the digital and geospatial domains. Its approach here complements but differs subtly from the SCO, emphasizing economic development, technological partnership, and challenging Western dominance. Within BRICS+, China promotes interoperability not just through BDS (also actively pushed here) but also by fostering collaboration on alternative geospatial data platforms and standards that reduce reliance on Western providers. Initiatives like the proposed "BRICS Remote Sensing Satellite Constellation" (jointly developed by space agencies) aim to create a shared pool of satellite imagery accessible to members. This directly enhances collective interoperability and data access while asserting technological independence. As Yu Hong argues, "BRICS cooperation in space and geospatial technologies represents a concerted effort to construct South-South technological autonomy and challenge the monopoly of advanced capitalist economies in critical digital infrastructure."[20]

The expanded BRICS+ membership vastly increases the audience for Chinese-led capacity building. China offers extensive training programs, technology transfers, and scholarships related to geospatial sciences and applications, targeting professionals across Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America via the BRICS+ umbrella. This massive capacity building effort serves to proliferate Chinese standards, create dependencies, and build a vast network of professionals oriented towards Chinese systems and methodologies. As Ching Kwan Lee observes, "China's developmental outreach, including in high-tech areas like geospatial, leverages scale and lack of political conditionalities to rapidly expand its footprint and influence across the Global South."[21]

Asian Development Bank (ADB): Leveraging the Established System

Unlike SCO and BRICS+, which China seeks to shape and lead, the ADB represents an established multilateral development bank (MDB) with significant US and Japanese influence. However, as a major shareholder and the largest economy in Asia, China skillfully leverages the ADB to advance its GSDI goals, particularly within the context of development finance and regional infrastructure. China actively works to ensure that ADB-funded infrastructure and technical assistance projects in Asia incorporate Chinese geospatial technologies and standards, particularly BDS. By advocating for the use of BDS in ADB project surveying, construction monitoring, and asset management, China achieves widespread interoperability with its system across recipient countries. This embeds Chinese technology within critical regional infrastructure. As Zhang Yun argues, "China's strategy within MDBs like ADB involves persistently advocating for the inclusion of its national standards in project specifications, gradually normalizing their use across recipient countries."[22]

China participates in co-financing arrangements with the ADB, particularly for large infrastructure projects under the BRI umbrella. In these projects, Chinese companies (using Chinese technology and standards) are often key implementers. China also engages in knowledge partnerships with the ADB, contributing research and expertise on geospatial applications for development. These collaborations advance institutional collaboration and capacity building (as ADB projects include training components), but often channel resources and influence through Chinese entities and norms. The ADB's "Strategy 2030" emphasis on technology and digital infrastructure creates openings China actively exploits. China uses its voice within the ADB to influence the institution's digital agenda, including its approach to geospatial data governance. While facing constraints from other major shareholders, China advocates for approaches that emphasize national sovereignty over data and support for nationally-led SDI development, consistent with its broader stance. Projects like the ADB's "Digital Technology for Development Initiative (DIGIT)" become arenas where competing visions of data governance, including geospatial, are negotiated. As Ann Florini and Yeling Tan note, "Established MDBs like ADB are contested spaces where rising powers like China seek to incrementally shift norms and practices around technology and data governance towards models more aligned with their preferences."[23]

Response from the United States:

The US response to China's GSDI cannot be monolithic. It requires an integrated strategy combining principled resilience in defending core democratic values, pragmatic adaptation in reforming institutions and engaging the Global South, unwavering investment in alliance networks and technological edge, and clear-eyed cooperation on shared global threats. Success hinges not on recreating unipolarity, which is gone, but on shaping a pluralistic but rules-based international system where open societies can thrive, illiberal practices are constrained, and competition is managed peacefully. The ultimate challenge lies not just in countering China's vision, but in revitalizing America's own – demonstrating through action that a reformed liberal international order, grounded in democratic values, effective multilateralism, and equitable partnership, offers a more prosperous, stable, and just future for all nations than the state-centric, sovereignty-absolute paradigm advanced by GSDI. As Henry Kissinger cautioned, navigating this transition requires both a clear understanding of the adversary's strategy and a renewed commitment to the enduring strengths of the American project within a fundamentally changed world. The era demands competitive coexistence, driven by US strategic renewal and agile statecraft.

CONCLUSION

China's Global Security and Development Initiative (GSDI) represents far more than a foreign policy agenda; it is the ideological and institutional vanguard of a deliberate, systemic challenge to the US-led liberal international order (LIO). By architecting a coherent alternative framework—predicated on civilizational sovereignty, developmental security, indivisible security, and normative pluralism—China has weaponized

the LIO's legitimacy deficits to accelerate the transition toward a post-hegemonic world. This initiative is not revisionist tinkering but reconfigurative entrepreneurship, exploiting the liberal order's crises of overreach, institutional stagnation, and perceived hypocrisy to legitimize illiberal governance paradigms.

In essence, GSDI has irrevocably shattered the myth of historical inevitability underpinning Western liberalism. The 21st century will be defined not by a single order but by the tense, unstable mosaic of China's design—a world where sovereignty walls are high, development is divorced from democracy, and security is negotiated in the shadow of competing paradigms. As Kissinger warned, "The challenger's vision must be understood before it can be countered." Understanding GSDI is the first step toward navigating the fragmented future it has unleashed. Similarly, Amitav Acharya asserts, the outcome is not Chinese hegemony but a "multiplex world"—a fragmented order where GSDI's principles coexist uneasily with eroded liberal norms. The LIO's unipolar moment has yielded to an era of competitive order-building, where institutions, norms, and allegiances are perpetually contested. Consequently, for policymakers, the choice is stark; while containment risks Thucydidean catastrophe, complacency cedes normative terrain to authoritarian diffusion. The viable path is adaptive coexistence—reforming multilateralism to accommodate civilizational diversity without sacrificing fundamental rights.

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FOOTNOTES

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