

THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OF CHINA'S GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

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Abstract: China unveiled its Global Security Initiative (GSI) in a sensitive international context, only two months after the February 2022 start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine. Beijing garnered early international support for its initiative by promoting the concept bilaterally and at the leading multilateral fora. Yet, its main strategic communication effort occurred in February–March 2023. Beijing first reinvigorated the GSI with its *Concept Paper* on February 21 and then paired it, three days later, on the occasion of the first anniversary of Russia's operation, with its 12-point position paper on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis. Although the position paper received little support in the West, it boosted the prominence of the GSI, particularly among non-Western countries. Two weeks later, Beijing struck a remarkable strategic communication success for the GSI when it brokered a surprising deal between regional foes Iran and Saudi Arabia on the restoration of their diplomatic relations. Through this performance, Beijing succeeded in presenting the story not only about the existence of the GSI but also about its concrete potential as well as the important role it could play in the resolution of other conflicts. While support for the GSI has grown in the Global South, Western reactions have ranged from lukewarm to negative, accusing the initiative of spreading anti-NATO and anti-US aims and vying to become an 'alternative to the Western-led security order'. Nevertheless, an early assessment of China's strategic communication on the GSI shows timeliness, robustness, flexibility, attractiveness, communicative value of action, and coherence between words and deeds.

Keywords: China's Foreign Policy, Global Security Initiative, Belt and Road Initiative, Strategic Communication, Multipolarity.

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INTRODUCTION

The unveiling of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022 offered both an opportunity and a challenge for China's strategic communication. The opportunity arose from the fact that its core principles and objectives were congruent with the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 2021 Global Development Initiative (GDI), which had already gained traction both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. The announcement of the GSI by China's president Xi Jinping at the Boao conference was also a timely address of the causes and repercussions of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which had started only two months earlier. Yet, the conflict in Ukraine also presented a challenge for Beijing's diplomacy and strategic communication as Western states put intensive pressure on China to break cooperation with Moscow and join sanctions against the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the announcement of the new initiative occurred at a moment during which China was still operating severe COVID-fighting measures, which had disrupted its full diplomatic capacity, particularly in terms of face-to-face meetings, visits, and summits with foreign counterparts.

Nevertheless, Beijing pursued the strategic communication of the GSI in several phases and formats. After receiving a particular boost from President Xi's all-out diplomatic offensive in the fall of 2022, the GSI *Concept Paper* was revealed on February 21, 2023. Three days later, on the first anniversary of Russia's military operation in Ukraine, China followed up with a 12-point position paper on the conflict, built on the principles of the *Concept Paper*, thus raising diplomatic and media interest in the GSI. Only two weeks later, China's surprising shuttle diplomacy, resulting in the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, attracted undivided worldwide attention and became an important success for China's strategic communication.

This paper will look at how China performed its strategic communication of the GSI, how the initiative has been received in the West and in the Global South, and which challenges lay ahead. It will build on the key principles of effective strategic communication, strategic narratives, and frames.

CHINA'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The context of growing great power rivalry and the transformation of world order puts a heightened focus on the importance of strategic communication,

which has become a regular feature of strategic documents, policy papers, and summit declarations from Washington to Brussels and Beijing.

Strategic communication, as a concept of organised persuasion, represents a ‘system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organisations in order to advance their missions by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, and developing and implementing ideas and attitudes that, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behaviour or opinion’ (Mitić, 2016, p. 9). Strategic political communication, often geared at foreign publics, puts a particular accent on persuasion, engagement, the communicative value of action, and the coordination between words and deeds, while at the same time its effectiveness depends on adaptability and coordination (Mitić, 2016; Atlagić & Mitić, 2016). These principles provide a valuable framework for analysing the effectiveness of strategic communication operations, which provide a vehicle for strategic narratives, one of the key areas of today’s great power competition.

States and international organisations are creating directorates to set up and implement strategic communication policies. The US was an early adopter and proponent of the concept of strategic communication, setting up departments in institutions from the Pentagon to the State Department, home since 2009 to the Office of Strategic Communications and Outreach (US Department of State, 2023). The diplomatic service of the European Union, the European External Action Service (EEAS), has enlarged its East Stratcom Task Force, created in 2015 to monitor Russian information activities, into a full-fledged Directorate for Strategic Communication and Foresight. The Directorate has expanded the geographic scope of its task forces to the Western Balkans and the Middle East, with a mandate to ‘analyse the information environment in order to enable EU foreign policy implementation and protect its values and interests’ (European Union External Action, 2021). Faced with a Western strategic narrative about the rising “China threat”, China launched its own strategic communication ‘with Chinese characteristics’, thus promoting most prominently its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing framed the BRI as ‘win-win’, ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’, ‘sharing the fruits of development’, with the objective of building a ‘community of shared future for mankind’, encompassing ‘cooperative, collective, and common security’, respecting multilateralism,

the central role of the UN, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs, while opposing ‘zero-sum games’, unilateralism, the ‘law of the jungle’, and the ‘Cold War mentality’ in general (Xi, 2014, 2017). Thus, the BRI could be seen as a complex narrative: a system narrative (as it presents an alternative vision to the existing world order), an identity narrative (about the projection of China’s values and power), and an issue narrative (about specific infrastructure and investment objectives envisioned by the BRI) (Mitić, 2022).

The projection of China’s strategic communication and narrative has been incrementally opposed by Western actors in several phases, from worry and warning about the BRI implications to actions against concrete projects and against the BRI in general (Mitić, 2022). Yet, at the same time, the sheer expansion of the initiative, particularly in the Global South, with over 150 participant countries, and the strategic communication requirement of building up on established values and principles have led Beijing to continue to promote its initiatives with a strong grounding in BRI strategic communication. This was already present in a number of follow-up initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative (GDI), presented at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, and carrying out a number of BRI-related foundational principles (Centre for International Knowledge for Development, 2023).

THE UNVEILING OF THE GLOBAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

The unveiling of the Global Security Initiative has been a four-step process, including (1) the introduction of the idea by President Xi Jinping in April 2022; (2) its first presentation to foreign partners in September 2022 at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit (including garnering early supporter countries); (3) the unpacking of the GSI *Concept Paper* in February 2023; and (4) the operationalization of GSI principles and policies.

Introducing the idea of the GSI

President Xi first introduced the Global Security Initiative on April 21, 2022, during his keynote speech *Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation* at the opening of the Boao Forum for Asia

Annual Conference 2022 in Boao, Hainan Province. He laid out the reasons for the initiative, its underlying principles, and its objectives. President Xi set the context outright by underscoring that ‘changes of the world, of our times, and of history are unfolding in ways like never before’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China, 2022a). Although Xi certainly had in mind overall changes towards multipolarity, which had been underway for years now, as well as changes occurring due to digitalization, climate change, and the implications of the still ongoing fight against COVID-19, the more specific context was certainly the ramification of the Russian special operation in Ukraine, which had started two months earlier, on February 24.

Most of the principles laid out by Xi were in line with the 1955 Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the 2013 concept of ‘building a community with a shared future for mankind’, and the BRI – from respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty to the central role of the United Nations, common comprehensive cooperation, and sustainable security. Yet, the context of the conflict in Ukraine particularly highlighted principles such as the rejection of the Cold War mentality, bloc confrontation, unilateralism and unilateral sanctions, double standards, and pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of others’ security, as well as support for taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, building a balanced security architecture, and resolving disputes through dialogue and joint work.

Garnering early international support

In the aftermath of Xi’s speech, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi put the accent on ‘a new approach to eliminating the root causes of international conflicts and achieving durable stability and security in the world’, highlighting opposition to various elements of the ‘Cold War mentality’: bloc confrontation, zero-sum game, hegemonism, and power politics (Wang, 2022). At the SCO Foreign Ministers’ meeting in July in Tashkent, Wang Yi told Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that the two countries should ‘strengthen strategic communication’ about international security, thus announcing a new phase in China’s presentation of the GSI, oriented towards its strategic partners (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China, 2022b).

During his premier trip abroad after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi Jinping participated at the Samarkand SCO summit in September

2022, when for the first time he presented the GSI in person. Xi underlined the need for a new kind of approach to international security and called on SCO partners 'to get involved in implementing' the GSI (Xinhua, 2022a). Following a series of bilateral meetings at the summit, six countries signalled by statement their readiness to answer Xi's call: Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while India and Tajikistan did not indicate any formal support (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022).

President Xi followed up on the internationalisation of the GSI by associating it, a week after the SCO summit, with the UN International Day of Peace. In a letter, he underlined that 'at this important historical juncture', he put forward the GSI, calling 'on all countries to uphold a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security' and focusing on the centrality of the UN system (Cao, 2022). China thus brought its GSI proposal beyond its partner countries, inviting all countries and particularly attempting to integrate the initiative with the UN system, just as it did with the GDI a year earlier (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023). In November 2022, at the G20 summit in Bali, Xi reiterated the basic principles of the GSI, accentuating the UN Charter, the principle of indivisible security, and the negotiation of conflict through negotiation (Xinhua, 2022b). Throughout late 2022 and early 2023, the GSI continued to hold high on Beijing's agenda of both bilateral and multilateral activities.

Unpacking the GSI Concept Paper

The third phase of the GSI presentation had a noteworthy prelude. On February 20, 2023, the Xinhua News Agency published a report titled *US Hegemony and its Perils*, in which it accused the US of 'abusing hegemony', 'instigating regional disputes', 'directly launching wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights', 'clinging to the Cold War mentality', 'ramping up bloc politics', 'forcing unilateral sanctions upon others', and 'imposing rules that serve its own interests in the name of upholding a 'rules-based international order' (Xinhua 2023a). The following day, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published the *GSI Concept Paper* with six core concepts and principles, 20 priorities of cooperation, and five platforms and mechanisms of cooperation. The six principles in the concept paper were in line with Xi's earlier statements regarding the GSI: (1) the need for a new

vision of security—common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable; (2) respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (3) deep commitment to the principles of the UN Charter and opposition to the Cold War mentality, hegemonism, and unilateralism; (4) commitment to indivisible security; (5) commitment to peaceful and negotiated solutions instead of war and unilateral sanctions; and (6) commitment to security in both traditional and non-traditional domains, which have become intertwined, particularly in the fields of terrorism, climate change, cybersecurity, and biosecurity. Furthermore, the *Concept Paper* outlined the “Priorities for Cooperation”, including conflict hotspots, as well as the “Mechanisms of Cooperation”, focusing largely on the UN and other multilateral initiatives and networks in which China had been participating (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China, 2023a).

Operationalization of GSI principles and policies

These key principles of the GSI were applied as the core of China’s *Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, outlined on the first anniversary of Russia’s military operation on February 24, 2023. The first point of the plan pointed to respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, adding that ‘equal and uniform application of international law should be promoted, while double standards must be rejected’. The second is an argument against the ‘Cold War mentality’, against security at the ‘expense of others’, and particularly relevant, a reference that ‘the security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs’. Points three and four refer to negotiated and peaceful solutions, while point 10 refers to opposition to ‘the abuse of unilateral sanctions and ‘long-arm jurisdiction’ against other countries. The other points are more Ukraine-specific and include the need to reduce strategic risks, protect nuclear power plants, and facilitate grain exports (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China, 2023b). The timing of the anniversary of Russia’s military operation provided considerable attention to China’s proposal and thus to the core GSI principles.

Yet Beijing felt the need to go beyond words. Less than two weeks later, on March 6, Beijing hosted a meeting between Iran and Saudi Arabia, during which the two countries agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations. The meeting, prepared by Chinese shuttle diplomacy, stunned international

observers. Beijing, on its side, made sure to tie the diplomatic success to the GSI. Wang Yi, then director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee Comments, argued the outcome of the Saudi-Iranian agreement was ‘a successful application of the Global Security Initiative’ (Global Times, 2023a). The Global Times cited Chinese experts, commenting that ‘China’s mediation in the Saudi-Iran deal to restore ties (is) the best practice of the GSI, exerting far-reaching influence on other hotspot issues’ (Global Times, 2023b). Since then, Chinese officials and media have been underlying the success of Beijing’s diplomacy in the deal, tying it to the GSI, and particularly pointing out how the initiative would benefit other global hotspots and traditional and non-traditional security challenges (Mitra, 2023; Ma, 2023; CGTN, 2023).

GLOBAL RECEPTION OF THE GSI

The strategic communication process of presenting the GSI, including the global context, document wording, dynamic of international support gathering, and concrete messaging, made it clear that the GSI would receive the attention of two key target groups. The first group is made up of strategic partners and potential adherents to the GSI principles. The second is made up of Western countries and potential Western allies in the containment of China’s rise.

Global South adherents

Just as with the GDI, China did not have to wait long to receive early support from a number of countries. Only a week after Xi’s inauguration speech, nine Caribbean states having diplomatic relations with China supported the GSI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC of China, 2022c), followed by Laos, which emphasised ‘the importance of the legitimate security concerns of all countries’ (The Paper, 2022). Russia supported the SCO, followed by six members of the SCO at the Samarkand Summit (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), as well as Mongolia, Cuba, Uruguay, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Belarus. At the time of the unveiling of the GSI *Concept Paper*, a commentary in the *People’s Daily* argued that the initiative had received support ‘from more than 80 countries

and regional organisations around the world’ (People’s Daily, 2023). The *Concept Paper* and the Riyadh-Teheran deal gave further impetus. President Xi received support for the GSI from Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (Xinhua, 2023b), while Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang received support from his Malaysian (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China, 2023c) and Georgian counterparts (Xu, 2023). Media from countries of the Global South mostly reiterated key messaging of the GSI, including its timeliness, need for a balanced global security architecture, respect for security concerns of all countries, cooperative common security, opposition to double standards and unilateralism, as well as the fight against non-traditional threats and terrorism. Thus, in Zimbabwe, the media called for African acceptance of the GSI as an alternative to the ‘double standards’ and ‘unilateralism’ of the West, as well as in order to work jointly to fight terrorism (Chavhunduka, 2022). In Liberia, the GSI was seen as ‘upholding true multilateralism and stressing that we, humanity, are living in an indivisible security community’ (Dodoo, 2022). In Pakistan, the Riyadh-Teheran deal was hailed as ‘the result of the Chinese vision of global security in terms of GSI’ (Javed 2023).

Nevertheless, the GSI did not get unanimous support in the Global South. In particular, scepticism is present in India and a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific that are seen as potential supporters of Western plans for China’s containment.

Western opponents

The GSI received more analytical attention in Western countries. The majority of the frames employed by Western officials, think tanks, and media portrayed the GSI as a threat to the liberal “rules-based international order”. The following key frames could be distinguished:

(1) *The GSI presents an alternative to the Western-led security order.* This frame argues that China is seeking to promote a ‘China-led alternative’ (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022); ‘challenging the US-led liberal international world order’ (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023); ‘a manifesto for an alternative system of international affairs to the current “rules based” order led by the United States and its partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific’ (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023); ‘a roadmap and

ideological framework for China's ambition to re-shape the international order' (Legarda & Stec, 2022); an attempt to 'build support among countries in the global south for a narrative that positions China as the logical successor to a US-led multilateralism that Beijing insists is failing to keep the peace' (Kine, 2022).

(2) *The GSI is aimed against the US and NATO.* This frame argues that the concepts criticised by the GSI, such as 'hegemonism', 'bloc politics', and the 'Cold War mentality', are 'frequently-used terms to denounce US attempts at containing growing Chinese power through economic sanctions and security alliances' (Abb, 2023). Thus, Beijing is 'using the GSI to discredit U.S. leadership as a source of sustainable security' (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022), and 'its core objective appears to be the degradation of U.S.-led alliances and partnerships' (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023).

(3) *The GSI is promoting pro-Russian concepts.* This frame is particularly critical of the use of the concept of 'indivisible security', which is 'redolent of language Vladimir Putin used to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine' (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022), through which Chinese leaders join Moscow 'in excusing the unlawful invasion of Ukraine by blaming the US-led NATO for committing the "original sin" that led to the war' (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023).

(4) *The GSI is exploiting the UN system.* This frame argues that, just as with the BRI and the GDI, Beijing will seek to incorporate the language of the GSI 'into UN statements and other materials' (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022) and that 'China is exploiting its growing influence at international organisations such as the UN system to promote its initiatives and their principles' (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023), with the 'underlying aim remaining to reform the UN from within' (Ekman, 2023).

(5) *The GSI is expanding its internal security approach to the global level.* This frame argues that GSI is being used as 'a framework for promoting and normalising China's expansive approach to domestic security globally' (Freeman & Stephenson, 2022), thus signifying an 'evolving Chinese worldview in which internal policies are externalised' (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023), with the GSI becoming 'Xi's favoured vehicle for externalising the comprehensive national security concept' (Greitens, 2023).

(6) *The GSI will not be able to close the gap between words and deeds.* This frame argues that the GSI will not succeed in addressing some of the discrepancies observed by Western analysts between the principles of the

initiative and the policies of Beijing. There is an ‘apparent gap between China’s rhetoric and its behaviour’ (Tiezzi, 2023). ‘The more deeply Beijing involves itself in international diplomacy, the more obvious the inconsistencies and biases of its approach become’ (Schuman, Fulton & Gering, 2023), and ‘it would be a hard sell for China to promote the GSI in any meaningful way across Southeast Asia while simultaneously engaging in grey zone operations through the maritime militia in the South China Sea’ (Fiala, 2022).

(7) *The GSI will (never the less) try to appeal to (some) European states.* This frame, present among European experts, argues that despite the GSI focus on the Global South, Beijing will ‘also try to secure buy-in from European countries’ and that, although the EU is not mentioned in the document, ‘this does not mean that China will not open some of the GSI initiatives to the EU and several of its Member States’ (Ekman, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Within a year, the GSI has gained considerable and growing interest, allowing for an early assessment of its strategic communication.

First, China presented the GSI not only at a timely moment, following Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, but also insisted that the unveiling of the initiative was due to the unprecedented changes and fallacies of the existing, albeit rusting, international security architecture and mechanisms. It was able to demonstrate the instability of the world security order and its rules/principles, thus making the case that the time was ripe for change. The length and escalation of the conflict in Ukraine accentuate these points.

Second, the GSI shows consistency and complementarity with Beijing’s previous and current strategies, from the earlier comprehensive national security strategy, the ‘community with a shared future for mankind’, and the BRI, up to the new GDI and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Despite Western attempts to derail Beijing’s strategic narrative, the wording and concepts employed show robustness and coordination, which are necessary for effective strategic communication.

Third, the robustness of the initiative nevertheless does not preclude flexibility in its implementation. The GSI presented a wide range of possible fields and mechanisms, which gives Beijing multiple possibilities to choose

when and how to strike diplomatic successes in the security field and tie them to the initiative, just as it was done with the Saudi-Iranian deal.

Fourth, the Saudi-Iranian deal marked an outstanding success not only for Beijing's diplomacy in general but also for the strategic communication of its GSI. Through the deal, China was able to demonstrate the communicative value of action and coherence between words and deeds, two of the key but also most difficult aspects of strategic communication. The success of the deal and its tie to the GSI gave not only more prominence to the initiative but also attracted heightened interest in its immense possibilities.

Fifth, strategic communication is persuasive, and its aim is to expand the attractiveness of arguments, ideas, and concepts. The sheer number of countries that have supported the GSI since its inception is thus an indicator of the success of its strategic communication. The target group of GSI's strategic communication is mostly countries of the Global South, where the GSI has indeed gained the most traction.

Nevertheless, the GSI faces, and will continue to face, numerous challenges.

First, the Western negative framing of the GSI, while fully expected, is also an indicator of the main lines of criticism of the initiative, as it is portrayed as an attempt to dislodge the Western rules-based liberal democratic order with a global export of "authoritarian-made" sets of "undemocratic" or "illiberal" measures. If the path of the critical framing of the BRI is followed, this means more attacks not only on the foundational concepts but also on specific aspects/achievements, as well as the GSI as a whole.

Second, the initiative will have to confront the harsh limitations of its global reach, as the majority of Western stakeholders are likely to maintain negative attitudes towards the GSI. Most of the US/EU frames on the GSI are similar or identical. However, some EU think tanks mention that China intends to appeal to European states with the GSI. They also attempt to look at some of the GSI mechanisms and instruments less ideologically. The US stakeholders do not mention any possible compatibility with the GSI, and they are more focused on the challenge the initiative is presenting for the United States. These differences should be noted, although they should not be overestimated.

The growing US-China strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific, the continuing conflict in Ukraine, and the overall geopolitical chessboard will continue to pose formidable obstacles but also opportunities for the GSI. The transformation of the world order and the speeding up of the process of multipolarity are opening possibilities for the expansion of the concepts embodied in the GSI as well as for its worldwide legitimacy. As a whole, the GSI success story could contribute to further legitimization of the BRI and the early acknowledgment of “sister initiatives”—the GDI and the GCI.

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