

# CHINA'S GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE IN THE AGE OF NEW MULTILATERAL PARADIGMS

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**Abstract:** Contemporary international landscape is characterised by the emergence of new multilateral paradigms. In such context, China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) has garnered increasing attention as a transformative force with far-reaching implications. This paper examines the evolving dynamics of the GDI amidst the rise of new multilateral approaches to global governance and the structure of the international system. It begins by situating the GDI within the broader context of China's growing influence on the global stage and the shifting multilateral landscape. The text explores how the GDI intersects with emerging multilateral frameworks and institutions, such as the UN, and other mechanisms for its promotion. It examines how China's initiative aligns, complements, or competes with these evolving multilateral approaches and the responses from other major actors in the international arena. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of a nuanced understanding of China's GDI in the age of new multilateral paradigms. By shedding light on the complexities of the GDI and its interaction with the changing multilateral landscape, this analysis contributes to informed policy discussions and scholarly inquiries about China's role in shaping the future of international relations.

**Keywords:** China, Global Development Initiative, inclusive multipolarity, BRI, geopolitical competition, development, UN.

## INTRODUCTION

China's ascent as a global economic powerhouse has been accompanied by its proactive engagement in global development initiatives, notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), established exactly a decade ago. In the ever-evolving global landscape of international relations, the emergence of new multilateral

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The paper presents the findings of a study developed as a part of the research project "Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2023", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia and conducted by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, during the year 2023.

paradigms has reshaped the dynamics of global governance and international cooperation. Amidst these transformations, China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) has emerged as a potent and transformative force, eliciting significant attention and scrutiny. This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the GDI within the context of these new multilateral approaches to global governance and the international system. By analysing its preliminary development phase, underlying principles, and multifaceted components, this paper seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between China's GDI and the evolving multilateral paradigms that define contemporary international relations. The paper situates the GDI within the broader context of China's expanding global influence and the shifting multilateral landscape. The analysis is focused on assessments of the potential benefits and risks associated with China's GDI, particularly in domains such as international trade, investment, infrastructure development, and connectivity. It also addresses some concerns regarding debt sustainability, initial projects performed under its scope, funding, multilateral support from abroad, and the implications of geopolitical competition in the wake of expanding Chinese influence.

Lastly, by shedding light on the intricate complexities of the GDI and its interaction with the changing multilateral security architecture, this paper aims to significantly contribute to informed policy discussions and scholarly inquiries about China's role in shaping the future of international relations. The paper commences by elucidating the foundational tenets and concepts underpinning the GDI, contextualising them within the broader backdrop of an increasingly assertive Chinese contemporary security policy. Following this contextualization, the author proceeds to scrutinise the discernible shift in the multilateral paradigm underpinning the GDI. The ensuing analysis is centred on the meticulous identification of prospective challenges and impediments that the Initiative might confront in the foreseeable future, including potential resistance from individual states within various multilateral forums. Subsequently, a succinct exposition of the limited corpus of academic literature dedicated to the GDI within the realm of international relations theories is provided. This will serve as a preliminary overview of the prevailing scholarly discourse surrounding the GDI. Building upon this, the text proceeds to delineate specific multilateral frameworks and platforms within which the GDI is poised to evolve. It will illuminate the various modalities and prognostications pertaining to the Initiative's prospective development within the complex milieu of multilateral organisations and forums.

## **A NOVELTY OF CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY – THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE**

China's GDI was introduced in a way quite unusual for a superpower. Its president, Xi Jinping, participated in the general debate of the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 2021, during which he delivered a significant address titled "Enhancing Confidence and Collaboratively Addressing Challenges to Foster an Improved Global Order". In his address, Xi unveiled the details of the GDI on the global stage, aligning it with China's recently articulated strategy of 'an inclusive approach to multipolarity' (MFA PRC, 2022a). Through this gesture, China aimed to extend an invitation to nations worldwide to embrace the principles of this Initiative and become active participants, contributing concrete resources to support its effective implementation. Xi further stated that in the realm of global development, it is imperative to emphasise the paramount importance of placing development at the forefront of the global macro-policy agenda. This necessitates a heightened degree of policy coordination among major economies, with a sustained commitment to policy continuity, coherence, and sustainability (Xi, 2021). He furthermore made it crucial to foster 'equitable and balanced global development partnerships', 'augment synergy' among multilateral development cooperation mechanisms, and 'expedite the comprehensive realisation of the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development' (Xi, 2021). The centrality of adopting a people-centred approach underscores the imperative of safeguarding and enhancing the well-being of individuals. This approach underscores the need to protect and advance human rights through development initiatives, ensuring that development aligns with the interests and aspirations of the populace.

The commitment to inclusive benefits underscores the need to consider the unique needs and challenges faced by developing countries. Strategies such as debt suspension and development aid are to be employed with a distinct focus on aiding vulnerable nations grappling with exceptional difficulties. That is why Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted that the core of this commitment lies in the resolve to address disparities in development both among and within countries. In embracing innovation-driven development, it is essential to recognise and harness the opportunities arising from the latest technological revolution and industrial transformation (Xi, 2021). This endeavour demands a redoubling of efforts to leverage

technological advancements for heightened productivity. Simultaneously, it necessitates fostering an environment characterised by openness, fairness, equity, and non-discrimination in the domain of science and technology development. In the post-COVID era, the GDI's primary objective was the cultivation of novel growth drivers, facilitating collective leapfrog development. The commitment to harmony between humanity and the natural world underscores the imperative of enhancing global environmental governance and proactively responding to climate change. This commitment envisions the establishment of a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the natural environment, culminating in the creation of a harmonious ecological community. The transition to a green, low-carbon economy, accompanied by green recovery and development, takes precedence. China aims to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, underscoring its resolute dedication to these objectives. Furthermore, China has pledged to enhance support for developing countries in their adoption of green, low-carbon energy solutions while refraining from the establishment of new coal-fired power projects overseas. In the context of results-oriented actions, the imperative is to amplify investments in development. Priority cooperation is imperative in areas encompassing poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response, vaccine distribution, development financing, climate change mitigation, green development, industrialization, the promotion of the digital economy, and the enhancement of connectivity. The accelerated implementation of the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development is pivotal in the pursuit of forging a global community of development with a shared destiny. China has pledged an additional three billion US dollars in international assistance over the next three years to support developing nations in their responses to COVID-19 and the promotion of economic and social recovery.

In 2021, China's State Council Information Office issued a booklet depicting the ideas laying behind China's idea of global development. It sees China as 'an actor having a sense of responsibility as a major country, upholding the universal values of humanity such as peace, development, equity, and freedom', while striving to offer 'more public goods to the international community and join forces to build a better common future' (PRC State Council, 2021, p. 5). Such promotion of global international order with a *shared future* is the very first task of China's international development cooperation (2021, p. 5). What Chinese leaders have always perceived as the

key mission of a modern China is ‘pursuing the greater good and shared interests’, which is also stipulated as the Chinese cultural tradition and its belief in internationalism (2021, p. 5). There are eight principles on which Chinese activities in development cooperation are based: respecting each other as equals; doing the best it can; focusing on people’s lives (and their improvement); performing effective cooperation in diverse forms; providing the means for independent development; ensuring delivery and sustainability; being open and inclusive to promote exchanges and mutual learning; and advancing with the times and breaking new ground (2021, pp. 21-23). Therefore, the GDI serves as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the realm of global development. It represents the practical implementation of a human development policy uniquely tailored to China’s specific characteristics. Simultaneously, it embodies the concept of a shared human destiny, which aligns with the principles of Confucian philosophy and is currently championed by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In his exploration of the cultural and philosophical backdrop in which the Global Development Initiative (GDI) was introduced, Ronald Keith (2017) discerns a fundamental distinction between two guiding principles for the conduct of a superpower such as China. Keith contends that ‘harmony’ stands as a response rooted in the logical composition of diverse elements, while ‘uniformity’ seeks merely to replicate and coincide with dissimilar elements. Consequently, ‘harmony’ necessitates ‘independence’ rather than ‘hegemony’ (Keith, 2017). It not only acknowledges disparities between states but also recognises distinctions between civilizations with the goal of transforming them into sources of constructive mutual learning within a future global state of harmony. According to Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily) in Beijing, the lesson to be drawn is that ‘harmony’ should be cultivated through a threefold approach that deconstructs its inherent connotations. Firstly, individuals, and by extension, individual states, are encouraged to take their own initiative. Secondly, individuals or states should allow others the freedom to take initiative. Lastly, individuals must excel at engaging in friendly cooperation with others. Keith (2017) reminds us that the prescription aligns with the five principles and places a new policy emphasis on the ‘democratisation of international relations’ as an alternative to a world dominated by major powers. Significantly, this term appears to offer a potential dividend in China’s pursuit of the influence associated with soft power. The Chinese perspective on the significance of ‘harmony’ sets it apart

from the concept of the ‘clash of civilizations’ and highlights a distinction in how China approaches non-traditional security issues, especially ethnic conflicts and terrorism. The Chinese assertion posits that terrorism does not originate exclusively from ‘civilization’ itself and underscores the importance of recognising differences between civilizations based on the principle of ‘seeking common ground while respecting differences’ to advance human civilization (Keith, 2017).

Wang Lei examines the GDI from three distinct perspectives: historical justification, theoretical underpinnings, and the practical domain of GDI policy. As per the first rationale, Lei believes that the GDI is grounded in a materialist interpretation of world history and that China has introduced the GDI in alignment with the overarching trends of human history. This international Initiative, aimed at fostering global development, holds historical inevitability and sound rationale (Lei, 2022). In the theoretical domain, Wang Lei asserts that the Initiative surpasses the confines of hegemonic stability theory by virtue of China’s proactive provision of international public goods, driven by the dual objective of advancing its own development and that of other nations (Lei, 2022). He contends that, as a public goods initiative rooted in values, the proper alignment of principles and interests establishes a theoretical foundation for international development cooperation. This foundation is predicated on the principles of mutual consultation and common development, aimed at achieving mutual and collective benefits (2022, p. 16). In the sphere of realpolitik, Lei claims that China’s GDI has been severely challenged by numerous geopolitical processes occurring on a global scale. Apart from his argument that ‘protectionism impedes global development’, he believes that confrontation leaves no winners and that retrogression from openness and inclusion to self-seclusion and isolation will dampen the growth of wealth and diminish the momentum of global development. Against the headwinds of globalisation, the GDI has breathed stability and energy into global development (Lei, 2022).

### **The first achievements and the GDI’s multilateral shift**

It is not surprising that the Chinese proposal for the GDI garnered significant support from a substantial portion of the world within the first two years of its existence. During this period, the Chinese government allocated

substantial resources and funds to finance projects within this initiative, some of which have already been implemented. China has also gathered over 100 countries and organisations that openly endorse and support it and has devised several multilateral formats aimed at promoting the GDI. In 2022, the Councillor and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, Wang Yi, presided over the Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative, which garnered the participation of distinguished representatives from 60 nations, comprising four Deputy Prime Ministers and over 30 Foreign Ministers. Additionally, senior officials from approximately ten international organisations and the United Nations (UN)<sup>1</sup> entities, including UNDESA, UN-OHRLS, UNDP, FAO, UNESCO, IMO, IRENA, and the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Africa, were in attendance. During the Ministerial Meeting of the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative (GDI), convened on September 20, 2022, participants expressed unwavering commitment to the full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and urged international bodies, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), to play a more substantial role in GDI cooperation to address climate change and promote sustainable development (PRC MFA, 2022). Developed nations were called upon to honour their climate financing pledges of USD 100 billion annually, with support expressed for the Global Climate Fund and Global

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<sup>1</sup> On April 20, 2023, the UN Resident Coordinator in China conducted a briefing on the New Progress of the Global Development Initiative and New Actions to Implement the 2030 Agenda. During the address, it was emphasised that China's GDI is unequivocally linked to the UN 2030 Agenda. The establishment of China's Global Development Initiative in 2021, along with the recent enhancement of the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, presents a significant opportunity to address financing gaps, harness China's technological expertise to support the development priorities of developing countries, and ultimately expedite global progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2023). Furthermore, it was noted that the priority areas of the GDI closely align with many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These areas encompass poverty eradication, food security, health, climate action, preservation of the planet, industrialization, innovation, and means of implementation. The UN welcomed these efforts and expressed its commitment to collaborating with CIDCA and Chinese counterparts to leverage these initiatives for the advancement of south-south cooperation and sustainable development on a global scale in these specific domains (UN, 2023).

Environment Facility to optimise resource utilisation and assist developing countries in their pursuit of sustainable development through climate adaptation and mitigation. Energy access challenges in developing nations were acknowledged as a critical issue, emphasising the need for universal access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy and calling for comprehensive engagement in implementing SDG7. Additionally, the importance of promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, diversification of production, and industrialization strategies aligned with national priorities for developing countries was emphasised. Development assistance resource gaps were highlighted, with an invitation for developed countries to enhance communication and align official development assistance with the needs of developing nations. Multilateral development institutions were urged to increase resource allocation for domestic development and the 2030 Agenda implementation, and the significance of strengthening South-South cooperation was underscored. The meeting also addressed the need to overcome supply chain disruptions and enhance regional and cross-regional economic integration and connectivity, with a focus on digital technologies, knowledge sharing, and people-to-people exchanges. Openness and inclusivity in GDI cooperation were deemed essential, inviting the participation of other countries and international organisations, including think tanks, enterprises, multilateral development agencies, and civil society. Finally, UN development agencies were recognised as important partners, with discussions on establishing a task force to strengthen policy dialogues, strategic alignment, and resource mobilisation in priority GDI areas (MFA PRC, 2022a).

In 2022, China made a significant announcement regarding the transformation of the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund into the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, accompanied by an augmentation of its total funding to \$4 billion (Xinhua, 2023). As part of this initiative, Chinese financial institutions have established a dedicated fund of \$10 billion for the implementation of the GDI, with more than 200 cooperation projects integrated into the GDI project portfolio (Xinhua, 2023).

Over the last three years, a variety of politico-security events have shaped the international system on a worldwide scale. For this reason, the analysis of the GDI as a *sui generis* China's policy should include the burgeoning multilateral paradigms, emphasising projects like the BRICS, forums to support



the GDI, and UN efforts in the GDI implementation. In June 2022, President Xi Jinping presided over the High-level Dialogue on Global Development, which saw the participation of 18 nations, including Egypt, Argentina, Indonesia, Iran, the Russian Federation, Cambodia, Ethiopia, India, Malaysia, and Thailand (MFA PRC, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

In his speech titled “Forging High-quality Partnership for a New Era of Global Development”, President Xi underscored the enduring significance of development as a paramount human endeavour. He emphasised that continued development is imperative for realising improved living standards and social stability (MFA PRC, 2022). Despite ongoing global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, difficulties in implementing the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, and widening North-South disparities, President Xi observed that emerging markets and developing countries have made notable strides in various domains (MFA PRC, 2022). These countries are increasingly committed to unity, peace, and cooperation, and they are poised to harness opportunities stemming from the ongoing scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE GDI**

Drawing from an array of academic sources and policy analyses, it can be observed that China has outlined a series of tangible measures in collaboration with international partners to advance the implementation of the High-level Dialogue on Global Development and Global Development Initiative (GDI) cooperation. These measures span various domains. For instance, China has initiated the release of the initial GDI project implementations to serve as exemplars of collaborative efforts. Additionally, there is a focus on enhancing agricultural technical cooperation to promote sustainable and eco-friendly farming practices. Furthermore, China is actively

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<sup>2</sup> All member states of the BRICS grouping, which encompasses even four of the six nations that extended invitations to participate in the initiative, namely Egypt, Argentina, Iran, and Ethiopia, were counted among the 18 nations in attendance. It is noteworthy that these four countries are slated to become full members of BRICS, effective January 1, 2024. This development underscores the widespread endorsement of the initiative and reaffirms the robust diplomatic and economic ties shared with the People’s Republic of China, as well as its alignment with its foreign policy objectives.

engaging in global clean energy cooperation and facilitating smart customs and connectivity initiatives. It has also taken steps to establish the World Digital Education Alliance, aiming to optimise education resources through digitization. Another notable endeavour involves the promotion of the “Bamboo as a Substitute for Plastic” Initiative in collaboration with the International Bamboo and Rattan Organisation. Lastly, China is committed to the global sharing of data acquired from the Sustainable Development Science Satellite (SDGSAT-1) to inform decision-making in support of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, participants at the Ministerial Meeting expressed gratitude for China’s role in hosting the event and for the release of the GDI project pool projects and related concept papers, affirming their commitment to active engagement in cooperative efforts. They also emphasised the importance of heightened communication between UN development agencies and the participating nations to invigorate the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through GDI cooperation.

Kurita (2021) delves into the examination of China’s development policy in the context of its foreign policy principle of non-intervention. He contends that China has exhibited a decreasing reluctance to engage with non-governmental entities in regions of instability, marking a departure from its traditional approach of exclusively dealing with incumbent governments or a single party during conflicts. He enlists the case of Myanmar, in which China found itself facing local anti-China sentiments due to its perceived favouritism towards a select elite group through its economic presence (Kurita, 2021). To address this, China proactively initiated direct engagement with various local stakeholders, including local businesses, government officials, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the Buddhist clergy. This engagement aimed to garner support for its economic initiatives while also serving as a mediator in resolving conflicts between the Myanmar government and ethnic rebel groups (2021, p. 5). The GDI faces significant challenges due to increasing Sino-scepticism in certain parts of the world, notably in Europe. This scepticism often centres on concerns about China’s political intentions, transparency in its initiatives, and adherence to international norms. To overcome these challenges, China may need to engage in more transparent communication, address regional anxieties, and demonstrate a commitment to the principles of mutual cooperation and inclusivity that underlie the GDI.

Inclusion of China's global development into a multilateral approach is not a novelty. Although it can be argued that some of the most recent attempts made by Beijing are indeed oriented towards a multilateral approach, this idea was presented quite earlier. It thematically stuck to the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development with an initial idea to follow 8 areas of interest in which China would actively participate: poverty reduction, food security, healthcare, high-quality education, gender equality, infrastructure, sustainable and innovation-driven economic growth, and eco-environmental protection (PRC State Council, 2021).

The GDI has attracted a lot of attention within the UN system. In June 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released the "Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative" (GDI). According to the Report, the GDI's primary objective remains the 'consolidation of global consensus on prioritising development to expedite the realisation of the 2030 UN Agenda' (MFA PRC, 2023). With the midway point in the 2030 Agenda's implementation, it is imperative that the GDI efficiently mobilises and allocates resources to maximise the synergies created for development (2023, p. 39). The GDI, serving as a significant public good and an inclusive cooperation platform accessible to the international community, presents an opportunity for China, as a developing nation, to increase its efforts in rallying international development resources. These resources are vital for advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through GDI cooperation. Participating countries in the GDI should explore inventive strategies and cooperative models to engage further developed nations, international financial institutions, development aid organisations, Chinese and international corporations, as well as non-profit foundations. Encouraging increased contributions and participation in GDI cooperation is essential. Furthermore, the GDI must deepen its practical cooperation efforts, yielding concrete advantages for the development of all nations, particularly those in the developing world. It is crucial to prioritise project design and implementation based on actual development needs, adopt a project-centric approach, foster extensive involvement, embrace comprehensive collaboration, and place special emphasis on addressing critical issues.

## CONCLUSION

As of the very beginning of the Initiative's implementation, China has made notable efforts to promote it as a widely spread and universally accepted global policy. In November 2022, Wang Yi emphasised that the Global Development Initiative represented 'another significant global public good championed by President Xi Jinping, building upon the foundation of the BRI' (China Embassy to the US, 2022). This initiative, according to Wang, has played 'a pivotal role in expediting the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and revitalising global development efforts, aligning seamlessly with the aspirations of nations worldwide, particularly those in the extensive developing world' (China Embassy to the US, 2022).

In this manner, this paper reiterated the significance of China's GDI in the age of new multilateral paradigms. It underscores the need for ongoing research and policy discourse to fully comprehend the evolving role of China in shaping the future of international relations. The assessment of the GDI's chances and difficulties in the report also highlights the potential advantages of increased global investment, commerce, and infrastructure growth. It has, however, not shied away from tackling issues like debt sustainability, environmental effects, and the complexity of global competition. A sophisticated understanding of the GDI has also been stressed, taking historical explanations, theoretical foundations, and real-world policy domains into account. The GDI is now seen as a key global public good thanks to Wang Lei's insights on how it fits with historical patterns, theoretical precepts, and realpolitik considerations. As China continues to assert its influence on the global stage, the GDI represents a pivotal component of its foreign policy and development strategy. The GDI's ability to consolidate global consensus on development, foster international cooperation, and contribute to the realisation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is of paramount importance.

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