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Development, Security, Civilization, Governance: Decoding China’s Four-Initiative Strategy

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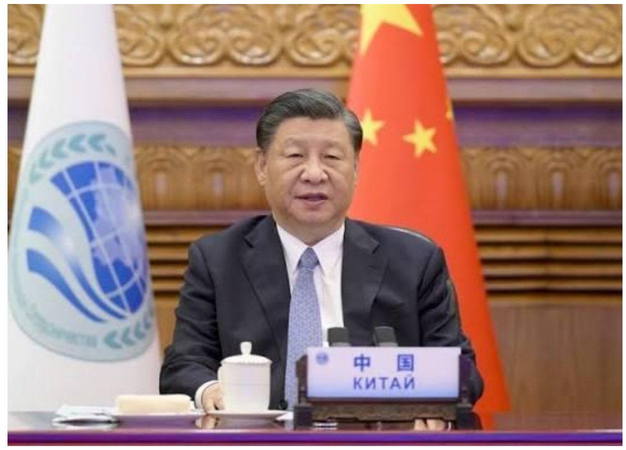
From Roads to Rules: China's Next Experiment in Global Leadership

Something changed in Tianjin in September 2025, and most of the commentary missed it.



At the "SCO Plus" meeting, Xi Jinping announced a fourth global initiative — the Global Governance Initiative (GGI). Chinese state media immediately slotted it into a tidy architecture: the Global Development Initiative (2021) supplies the material base, the Global Security Initiative (2022) the stable environment, the Global Civilization Initiative (2023) the shared values, and the GGI the institutional plumbing. Four parts, one design. Russia, Cuba, Pakistan, Nicaragua, Nepal and Venezuela signed on within days, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres offered supportive words.

Read that sequence backwards and it tells a story. China spent a decade financing ports, power plants and highways. Then it started publishing frameworks about what development should mean, how security should be organised, whose civilizational model counts as legitimate, and who gets a seat when the rules are written. The concrete came first. The concepts followed.

The question worth asking is not whether Beijing is gaining influence in the developing world. Obviously it is. The harder question is whether these initiatives amount to a coherent alternative architecture — an operating system, to borrow the metaphor — or whether they are a vocabulary being assembled around influence China already has.

The answer, so far, is: somewhere between the two, and the direction of travel matters more than the current position.

From Building Things to Shaping Rules

The Belt and Road as launched in 2013 was a construction programme with foreign policy consequences. It moved staggering sums. AidData's most recent dataset, released in November 2025, tracks over 30,000 Chinese-financed projects worth $2.2 trillion across 200 countries between 2000 and 2023 — a figure that dwarfs its own earlier estimates because researchers finally mapped Chinese lending into high-income countries too.

But the model was straining by the early 2020s. New Chinese loan commitments have hovered around $7 billion a year since 2023, down from more than $50 billion at the 2016 peak. Grace periods on the 2010s loans expired. The Lowy Institute calculated that developing countries owed China roughly $35 billion in repayments during 2025, with about $22 billion of that coming from the 75 poorest and most vulnerable economies. In 54 of 120 countries with usable data, what is owed to China now exceeds what is owed to the entire Paris Club combined.

> *China went from being the developing world's largest new lender to its largest single creditor collecting payments. That is not a footnote. It is the reason the strategy had to change.*

What replaced pure balance-sheet expansion was "small and beautiful" project selection, more equity and less sovereign debt, and — critically — a push into areas where influence is cheap: standards, norms, institutional design, digital infrastructure, training programmes, and the language in which development itself is discussed. BRI 1.0 was roads and grids. BRI 2.0 is digital, green and industrial. What the four initiatives add is something different in kind: an attempt to shape the assumptions that sit underneath any of it.

What the Four Initiatives Actually Say

The GDI is the most operational of the four and the easiest to verify. It runs through the China International Development Cooperation Agency, which maintains a Global Development Project Pool across eight priority areas: poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response, development financing, climate and green development, industrialisation, digital economy, and connectivity. The $4 billion Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund has backed more than 180 projects in over 60 countries — Ethiopia, Nigeria and Pakistan among them — working through the WFP, UNDP and IFAD. China has extended its contributions to the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund through 2030.

Note what that means. The GDI is not a rival to the UN system. It is delivered largely through the UN system, using the SDG framework as its scoreboard. That is a deliberate choice, and a shrewd one: it buys legitimacy no parallel institution could.

The GSI is thinner in practice and heavier in doctrine. Its six commitments — common and indivisible security, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, adherence to the UN Charter, taking every country's security concerns seriously, dialogue over disputes, and attention to non-traditional threats — read as a direct critique of alliance blocs without naming one. The operative principle is that no state should buy its own security at another's expense. Applied to Europe, that argument has been read as sympathetic to Moscow. Applied to Asia, it is a case against AUKUS and the Quad.

The GSI has produced some concrete output — the Saudi-Iran normalisation of 2023 is the exhibit Chinese diplomats reach for. It has produced no standing mechanism, no force, no treaty obligations. It is a diplomatic posture, and its main function is to offer states a way of talking about security that does not require choosing sides.

The GCI is the intellectually serious one, and the one most consistently underestimated in Western coverage. Its claim is that civilizations should not be ranked, that development paths are for each society to choose, and that modernisation and Westernisation are separable. That is a direct challenge to the idea — largely unquestioned in Western capitals since 1991 — that liberal democracy is the terminal destination of political development and everything else is a delay.

Whether one finds that liberating or self-serving depends heavily on where one sits. For a government facing Western criticism over elections or press freedom, the GCI supplies a ready-made counter-frame. For a citizen of that country, it may look like an argument for permanent authoritarianism dressed as cultural respect. Both readings are available, and both are being used.

The GGI is the newest and the most revealing. It calls for reform of international institutions, greater developing-country participation, and cooperation on climate, AI, finance and trade under a "people-centred" framing. Strip the language away and it is a demand for redistributed voting weight and agenda-setting power — the thing the GDI, GSI and GCI all imply but never quite state.

Beijing insists the four have separate priorities and can be pursued in parallel. That is the official position. The analytical reading is that the GGI functions as the keystone: it is where development, security and civilizational arguments are converted into a claim about who should be making the rules.

China’s Layers of Global Engagement

A useful way to hold this together:

Layer	Vehicle	What it moves
1 — Infrastructure	BRI, CPEC	Capital, concrete, physical connectivity
2 — Development	GDI	Models, financing, technical capacity
3 — Security	GSI	Doctrine, mediation, non-interference
4 — Civilization	GCI	Legitimacy, political-value pluralism
5 — Governance	GGI	Institutional voice and rule-making

The layers get progressively cheaper to build and progressively harder to reverse. A port can be renegotiated or nationalised. A norm, once accepted, is very difficult to withdraw.

Is this architecture, or is it a diagram drawn after the fact around things that happened for unrelated reasons? Honestly, some of both. The initiatives were announced in sequence over four years, not designed as a set. The "four-in-one" framing is retrospective packaging by Chinese state media. But packaging shapes behaviour: once a framework exists, ministries, banks and embassies begin organising their work around it, and partner governments begin citing it in joint statements. Architecture can emerge from improvisation.

The Global South Is Not a Bloc, and Knows It

The single laziest move in this debate is treating "the Global South" as a constituency with a position. It is not. Brazil under Lula wants MDB reform and a bigger climate finance pool, not a Chinese security doctrine. Indonesia takes Chinese money for nickel processing while pushing back hard in the South China Sea. India is in BRICS and the Quad simultaneously and has never joined the BRI. Gulf states buy Chinese technology, hedge on payment systems, and keep their security guarantee in Washington.

What these countries share is not enthusiasm for Beijing. It is a refusal to be forced into an exclusive choice — and a set of grievances about the existing system that are perfectly rational: IMF quota shares that have not caught up with three decades of economic change, conditionality that arrives faster than money, and a Western aid architecture now in visible retreat. G7 donors, which supply about three-quarters of global assistance, spent roughly 28% less in 2025 than in 2024. USAID was dismantled. The UK is cutting aid to 0.3% of gross national income by 2027–28.

China did not create that vacuum. It is filling parts of it, cheaply, with initiatives that cost far less than the aid budgets the West is cutting.

The realistic term for what most of these states are practising is multi-alignment: taking Chinese infrastructure, Western capital markets, Gulf energy money and Russian arms as separate transactions, and resisting any framework that bundles them. That is not fence-sitting. It is a strategy, and it is the single biggest constraint on China's ambitions — because an operating system only works if users commit to it exclusively, and almost nobody is committing.

The Dollar Question, Honestly Answered

Predictions of the dollar's imminent collapse have been wrong for fifty years and are wrong now. The interesting change is quieter.

The renminbi's share of SWIFT payments peaked near 4.74% in mid-2024 and fell back to roughly 2.75–3.1% by early 2026. That looks like failure until you notice the measurement problem: increasing volumes of yuan trade no longer touch SWIFT rails at all. China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System processed ¥175.5 trillion (about $24.5 trillion) in 2024, up 43% year on year. In March 2026, CIPS set a single-day record above ¥1.22 trillion — roughly $178.5 billion — across nearly 42,000 transactions, with average daily value up nearly 50% from February as Iran-related disruption pushed oil trade toward yuan settlement. Around 30% of China's own trade is now settled in renminbi, against 10% in 2017; with Russia, national-currency settlement exceeds 90% of bilateral trade. The mBridge CBDC platform has handled about $55 billion, roughly 95% of it in digital yuan.

Set against that: CIPS still leans on SWIFT messaging for the large majority of its transactions, capital controls remain, and no country holds serious reserves in a currency it cannot freely exit. Dollar dominance rests on safe-asset supply and market depth, not on payment plumbing, and neither of those has moved.

> *The honest formulation is not de-dollarisation. It is optionality. The dollar stays central; its monopoly on the exits does not.*

For countries exposed to sanctions or dollar liquidity squeezes, that difference is worth a great deal — and it is precisely the kind of change that accumulates invisibly for years and then looks obvious in retrospect.

Pakistan: Inside Every Layer, Mastering None

No country sits more completely inside China's framework than Pakistan. It is a BRI flagship, an SCO member, a GDI recipient, an early GGI endorser, and the host of CPEC — the corridor that gave the entire initiative its most-cited example. Islamabad is present at every layer.

The question is what it has extracted from that position.

What is working

In May 2026, Pakistan became the first South Asian country to issue a panda bond, raising RMB 1.75 billion (about $250 million) in China's onshore market at a 2.5% coupon on a three-year sustainable-development structure. It was oversubscribed more than five times. The ADB and AIIB together guaranteed 95% of it. An HBL executive noted it was likely the cheapest capital Pakistan has ever raised in international markets, and a follow-on issuance under the $1 billion programme is under discussion. Reserves rose $1.2 billion that week to $17.1 billion, helped by IMF inflows and the bond proceeds.

That transaction is a good illustration of what the emerging architecture actually looks like in practice — and it is worth noticing that it only worked because two multilateral banks, one of them Chinese-founded and one of them not, absorbed almost all the risk. Not a Chinese system. A hybrid one.

CPEC 2.0 has also been reframed intelligently. The pitch now is business-to-business rather than government-to-government: five planned corridors aligned with the government's Uraan Pakistan 5Es agenda, a roughly $13 billion project pipeline being converted into joint ventures, priorities in agriculture, mining, ICT and industrial relocation, and proposals to work with Chinese counterparts on automation and robotics through the National Center of New Manufacturing. Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal has framed the goal precisely: phase one solved the electricity shortage; phase two has to solve the export gap.

He is right about the problem. Whether the design solves it is a different matter.

The uncomfortable question

Pakistani policy discourse treats the relationship with China as an asset that generates returns automatically. The trade numbers say otherwise.

In the first ten months of FY26, Pakistan's exports to China reached about $2.22 billion. Imports from China in FY25 alone were $16.3 billion, up nearly 21%. The bilateral gap is roughly $15 billion and widening, and Pakistan's overall regional trade deficit grew 30% year on year to $12.7 billion over the same ten months. Look at what actually crosses the border: Pakistan ships refined copper, raw copper and cotton yarn; China ships cars, telephones and semiconductors. That is a raw-materials-for-manufactures relationship, which is the classic structure of dependency, not partnership.

> *Eleven years of CPEC has not changed the composition of Pakistan's exports. It changed the composition of its electricity supply and its debt stock.*

Meanwhile the corridor's core promise — Chinese industrial relocation into Pakistani special economic zones — has not materialised at scale, and the reasons are almost entirely domestic. Security is the most visible. At least 20 Chinese nationals have been killed and 34 injured in attacks since 2021. Baloch Liberation Army operations killed 31 civilians in January 2026 alone. Islamabad's response — a Special Protection Unit with a proposed $260 million budget, a quarterly joint security working group with Beijing, annual interior-minister meetings — is a serious institutional answer to a problem that keeps recurring, but Chinese commentary has grown noticeably less patient, and at least one Chinese analyst framed the choice for Islamabad in blunt terms: cooperate properly on security, or watch the investment thesis erode.

Beyond security sit the ordinary constraints that deter every investor: policy inconsistency, tax unpredictability, IMF-mandated fiscal discipline that rules out the debt-financed model of phase one, and a bureaucracy that Chinese firms find slow. The Asaan Karobar Act and SEZ tax exemptions are real reforms. They are also nowhere near sufficient on their own.

Here is the strategic risk, stated plainly. Vietnam, Indonesia, Morocco and Hungary are becoming nodes in Chinese manufacturing and green-technology supply chains. They compete for factories on cost, reliability and skills. Pakistan competes on geography and friendship. Geography is a genuine asset — but a corridor is something value passes through, and countries that only offer transit capture very little of what moves across them.

The friendship will hold. Beijing has too much invested, and Pakistan's strategic position relative to India and Afghanistan retains its own value. The question is whether Pakistan converts political intimacy into industrial capability, or spends another decade as the most loyal partner with the least to show for it. That conversion requires things China cannot supply: vocational training systems that produce employable technicians at scale, contract enforcement, an export sector that can meet Chinese quality standards, and negotiators who understand that technology transfer has to be written into agreements at signature, not requested afterwards.

Pakistan's China policy needs to move from managing projects to shaping frameworks. On present evidence, it is still doing the former well and the latter barely at all.

Not China Versus the West

The competition framing is comforting and mostly wrong. The PGI's $600 billion target by 2027 was always dependent on private capital mobilisation that has not appeared at anything like the required scale, and the Western aid retreat has hollowed out the credibility of the "better offer" pitch. But China's own lending has fallen from $50 billion a year to $7 billion, its official development assistance dropped to $1.9 billion in 2023, and its loan-to-grant ratio since 2013 runs around 31 to 1. Neither side is in a position to buy the Global South.

What is genuinely contested is narrower and more durable: which standards get adopted, which payment rails get built, which universities train the next generation of engineers and civil servants, whose 5G and AI governance templates spread, and whether "development" continues to mean converging on one political model.

On that last point, China's position has already won more ground than Western capitals like to admit — not because the GCI persuaded anyone, but because the record of the past twenty years did the persuading first.

What This Is, and What It Isn't

The strongest case against reading the four initiatives as an alternative order is the implementation gap. Announcements outrun delivery. The GSI has no institutions. The GCI has no enforcement. The GDI is meaningful but modest relative to global need, and much of it runs on UN infrastructure China did not build. Debt terms have been opaque, spillovers to local industry have often been thin, and Chinese state banks have behaved like creditors rather than partners when repayment came due.

Great-power behaviour in new vocabulary is a defensible description of a good deal of this.

But it is not the whole description, because the vocabulary is doing work. When a Pakistani finance ministry raises capital in Beijing at 2.5% guaranteed by two multilateral banks, when an African central bank runs settlement through CIPS, when a Southeast Asian government cites civilizational diversity in rejecting a human rights resolution — those are not just influence operations. They are the accumulation of alternatives. Each one is small. Together they change what is possible for a state that wants to say no to somebody.

> *The defining contest of the next decade is probably not over who runs the international system. It is over whether there continues to be only one accepted answer to the questions of how a country should develop, how it should secure itself, and what counts as a modern society. China is not offering a replacement operating system. It is arguing that the world should be able to dual-boot.*

Which brings the question back to Islamabad. Pakistan has been present at the creation of nearly every element of this emerging architecture and has shaped almost none of it. It endorses initiatives it did not draft, hosts a corridor whose industrial phase it cannot yet deliver, and runs a $15 billion trade deficit with its closest partner.

Being inside the system is not the same as having a say in it. Pakistan has the first. Whether it builds the economic and institutional capacity to earn the second is a decision that will be made in Islamabad, not Beijing — and mostly by whether the next five years are spent building factories and training engineers, or attending summits.