

CHINA'S NEW GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

// A rising power spreads its wings

On 21st February 2023, the Chinese Foreign Ministry released its concept for a “Global Security Initiative”, a white paper outlining the country’s proposed solution to challenges across traditional and non-traditional security issues. While the content mostly amounts to a restatement of long-standing principles and pooling of existing activities under a new label, its packaging as a “global initiative” should be seen as a statement of intent, claiming a much greater role in international politics. The sketched Chinese security agenda differs significantly from that of Western powers in both its principles and practices, making this field a new arena of competition between both sides.



A Chinese blueprint for security: Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang presents the Global Security Initiative at the Lanting Forum on 21st February, 2023 (Photo: © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Andy Wong).

by Pascal Abb

At the 2022 Bo’ao Forum for Asia, a Chinese-sponsored multilateral security conference, Chinese president Xi Jinping first announced the roll-out of a “Global Security Initiative” (GSI) as a Chinese “vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.”¹ Almost a year later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has followed up on this announcement with its recently-released concept for the GSI.² At 3,800 words in its official English translation, the document is quite short, especially considering its scope and the usual detail of Chinese government whitepapers on more

specific policies – for example, the 2020 whitepaper on China’s participation in UN peacekeeping ran to twice this length.³ It is structured into four sections: a brief introduction outlining current challenges to global peace and security; a statement of normative principles underlying China’s approach; a list of “priorities for cooperation” that makes up the bulk of the paper; and a brief overview of China-sponsored institutions that are supposed to serve as coordination platforms.

While it is worth studying the document in full, this analysis will briefly summarize four points that characterize China’s current approach to global security, what is new about it, and what sets it apart from other international efforts. It will also review ongoing Chinese activities that will now be pooled under the GSI, and discuss their aims and methods. Finally, I close with an outlook on the future of the GSI and its relationship with the security agency and interests of other international actors.

First, the GSI’s new agenda is indeed global in scope. While China is already an economic power with global reach and widely perceived as a future, or even present, superpower capable of rivaling US influence, Beijing has usually focused its cautious forays into security agency on specific regions (mainly Africa) and stressed the need to find local solutions to local problems.⁴ In the new concept, Africa still features prominently, but Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Pacific Islands are similarly broken out as focal areas. Likewise, when discussing fields from arms control to antiterrorism or food security, these are consistently framed as global challenges.

Second, the GSI is based on a very wide-ranging understanding of “security”. In this, China is arguably ahead of the curve, but no longer unique in world politics. Ear-

lier Chinese debates on this issue have already resulted in a holistic approach covering external threats and internal challenges to regime survival and societal stability, and sixteen sub-fields across economic, political and social life. Since 2014, this concept has been formalized as “comprehensive national security”, and informed a process of institutional reform and expansion of China’s security state.⁵ The US, Germany, Japan and many other nations have similarly expanded their view of security in recent policy revisions, but the totality of the Chinese concept still stands out. This also has practical implications: where the US has focused its international security provision on formal military alliances against external threats or joint counterterrorism operations, China’s nascent cooperation with other countries has instead stressed domestic security. For example, the highly-publicized China-Solomon Islands security pact lays out police training and “maintaining social order” as a concrete aim.⁶ This is likely to become an important niche for Chinese global security agency, especially when it comes to cooperation with other authoritarian governments facing domestic unrest.

Third, like previous Chinese statements, e.g. in the UN Security Council, it establishes a strong connection between peace and development. The two issues are linked in the paper’s opening sentence, where economic development is presented as the preferred tool for resolving conflicts. This builds on existing Chinese strengths and capabilities as an international development provider and establishes a Yin-and-Yang-like complementarity with the separately announced “Global Development Initiative”.⁷ But it also reflects a widely shared belief among Chinese policymakers and experts that political conflicts are ultimately rooted in economic inequality and can only be resolved through a development agenda that levels these differences.⁸ Fourth, the paper draws a clear dividing line to US and Western normative and practical approaches to security. While the US is not explicitly named in the document (neither are any other nation-state actors), this “other” is evident in positioning China’s approach against “hegemonism”, “unilateralism and protectionism”, and a “Cold War mentality”, all of which are frequently-used terms to denounce US attempts at containing growing Chinese power through economic sanctions and security alliances. In restating the long-standing Chinese diplomatic principles of national sovereignty and UN centrality as bedrock norms, the document also takes swipes at US-led interventionism and unilateralism in tackling acute security concerns. In practical policy, the initiative rejects the frequently-used Western tool of economic sanctions against transgressors, equating it to war as an inherently non-peaceful measure.

Chinese overseas security agency: growing ways and means

When it comes to specific security activities, the GSI predominantly restates ongoing Chinese initiatives that will now be rebranded as its components. Still, briefly reviewing this catalogue gives an impression of how broad and multifaceted Chinese security agency and cooperation with other actors already is. One well-covered aspect is China’s engagement in UN peacekeeping and -building, which has resulted in multiple long-term troop deployments to missions, mainly in Africa, and which has frequently been cited by Chinese diplomats as an example of using their country’s growing military clout towards peaceful ends and assuming greater international responsibility.⁹ Beyond troop deployments, China has been able to grow its peacekeeping profile by opening its training centers to international contingents, and providing financing and equipment for missions undertaken by the African Union (AU).

A second field in which China has been increasingly active for the past two decades is diplomatic conflict mediation, conducted mainly by special envoys shuttling between the involved parties. This activity has steadily expanded with the proliferation of Chinese overseas economic interests in conflict-prone regions, and current missions include dedicated envoys for the Horn of Africa, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Syria. The new concept stresses “candid dialogue and communication” as the preferred method of settling disputes, outlining a role for China to broker such talks. This continues a distinct Chinese style of mediation, which eschews casting blame or putting direct political pressure on conflict parties, aims to maintain working relations with all of them, and seeks to leverage the resulting pivotal position for the advancement of Chinese interests. While it may not result in immediately productive talks, this approach has had notable success in cultivating China-centric relations with sets of enemies: for example, in Myanmar’s complicated conflict, Beijing has maintained close relations with the junta government, the democratic opposition, and ethnic armed organizations controlling the borderlands. This has enabled the progress of Chinese infrastructure investments despite the country’s slide into civil war.¹⁰ Similarly, China’s recent plan for a “Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis” has been dismissed as vague and toothless by Western actors, but received cautious support from the governments of both Ukraine and Russia.¹¹

The paper also contains several sections on arms control measures, both related to weapons of mass destruction and smaller arms. On nuclear issues, it restates a commitment by all members of the UN Security Council that, “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”,¹² which has gained urgen-

cy in terms of dissuading an escalation of the war in Ukraine. However, it does not signal the often-demanded engagement on multilateral strategic arms limitation and reduction talks, an area where growing Sino-American tensions are likely to preclude progress.¹³ On small arms control, it promises further cooperation under the trilateral China-Africa-Europe framework to stem the flow of such weapons into African conflict areas.

This list is far from exhaustive, as the GSI also covers emerging areas like information and AI security, for which China already has established national security frameworks; or operations against terrorism and transnational crime, which have been institutionalized under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In these, it reflects the scope of China's concept of "comprehensive national security". What does not appear in this list, however, is a discussion of permanent overseas military deployments, or formal bilateral security agreements to address external threats. China has started to experiment with the former, notably opening a naval base in Djibouti in 2017 to support local logistics, sea lane protection and evacuation efforts,¹⁴ and there has been extensive speculation that port facilities constructed under the BRI might eventually serve Chinese military purposes.

However, as of now, there is little evidence that China is copying the US approach of providing security through forward military deployments. These would require

agreements with the respective hosts governments and need to serve their own security needs, and there is little apparent international demand for, or Chinese interest in, such arrangements. Instead, it is more likely that future China-centric security cooperation will be geared towards Chinese strengths and self-interests in tackling intrastate conflicts and domestic instability overseas. Accordingly, the GSI should not be seen as the overture to a Cold War rerun in which superpowers shore up their respective spheres of interests by military means. Indeed, many of the areas mentioned above are already subject to extensive international cooperation and sometimes overlap with the interests of Western actors – e.g. where fostering stability in Africa is concerned.

Conclusion

The GSI announcement could be dismissed as being light on content and mainly covering familiar ground, but this would be a serious underestimation of emerging Chinese global security agency. The GSI is part of a broader trend of proposing distinctly Chinese solutions to global problems. If previous efforts e.g. in global development and infrastructure financing are any guide, this is likely to be undergirded by significant resources.

China's emergence as a global security provider is shaped by both push- and pull-factors. The former are mainly rooted in its rapidly growing power and inter-



Peacekeepers in training: Chinese UN troops during the 2021 "Shared Destiny" drill at China's Qeshan peacekeeping training center (Photo: © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Ng Han Guan).

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national clout, greater ambition to play an active role in world politics – a key part of Xi Jinping's agenda, but also shared by many of China's intellectuals and citizens – and finally, a growing desire to affirm its new global status by making Chinese recipes available for others to emulate. At the same time, China's steadily-expanding economic interests have also exposed the country to increasing overseas security risks. Major investments, both under the BRI and earlier resource concessions, are clustered in extremely fragile and conflict-affected states.¹⁵ China's own immediate periphery features many countries that suffer from similar problems. Like other great powers before it, the development of a global overseas interest horizon will inevitably put greater demands on China to provide active protection. This steady "pull" into dangerous corners of the world is likely to demand further adaptation in Chinese foreign and security policy, gradually moving it into a more interventionist direction. Based on experiences with other recent Chinese strategic initiatives, the GSI is also likely to result in greater policy coordination within the party-state apparatus.

Earlier attempts to better institutionalize the field have already resulted in the formation of a National Security Commission in 2013 that brought external and internal security agencies under joint leadership.¹⁶ The fact that the GSI covers military, diplomatic and developmental efforts will also require greater coordination with the Chinese foreign ministry and international development agency.

Finally, as pointed out above, the GSI differs in many ways from the approaches of Western powers to global security issues. It stresses the primacy of national sovereignty over interventionism, UN centrality and multilateralism over smaller "coalitions of the willing", neutral over coercive mediation, and development over political inclusion. All of these elements also provide points of overlap with other countries of the Global South, a natural constituency for previous efforts to promote Chinese global leadership and a source of demand for solutions to widespread local security issues. Like the BRI before it, the GSI appears designed to fill this gap, and could prove equally competitive among third countries.

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