

China's New Initiatives and the Shaping of Eurasia's Strategic Environment

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Abstract: The United States retreat from Afghanistan and Washington's incremental China-containment pressure in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, have presented an important challenge for Beijing's shaping of a strategic environment in Eurasia favourable to its key domestic, regional and global interests. China faced an increasing threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Xinjiang, Taiwan), to its key role in the global supply chain (Western decoupling), to its maritime transport routes (increased U.S. military oversight in the South China Sea) and to its land routes through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar (terrorist attacks of the "Balochistan Liberation Army" in retreat from Afghanistan). Furthermore, Beijing needed to address the question of instability in Central Asia, its energy security in the Middle East with Saudi-Iranian tensions still on, and to tackle the issue of threats of Western sanctions over its cooperation with its closest strategic partner, the Russian Federation. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions taking their toll on both China's economic and diplomatic outreach, Beijing decided to push farther with its strategic undertakings. Thus, in addition to the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS in 2023, China presented three new initiatives in line with its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – the Global Development Initiative (GDI, 2021), the Global Security Initiative (GSI, 2022) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI, 2023). Building on

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the concepts of shaping and strategic narrative, this article looks at how Beijing involved its initiatives to pursue the shaping of the strategic environment and norms in Eurasia and beyond, pushing past the Western constraints of the “rules-based order” (RBO).

Keywords: China; China’s rise; Belt and Road Initiative; shaping; strategic narrative; rules-based order; multipolarity.

Challenging the constraints of the “rules-based order”

Under the presidency of Xi Jinping since 2013, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has stepped up its international power role, incrementally adding global political and security features to the world’s second largest economy. Inside China, this meant a strategic change from the early 1990s Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “hide capabilities and bide time” (*Tao Guang Yang Hui*) into the policy of “striving for achievement” (*Fen Fa You Wei*) implemented by Xi. Arguing for the change, leading Chinese international relations scholar Yan Xuetong claimed, already in 2014, that the new policy “shows more efficiency in shaping a favourable environment for China’s political rejuvenation”, increasing “both international political strength and the political legitimacy of a rising power”, and, as opposed to Deng Xiaoping’s policy, focusing on strengthening political support rather than economic gains (Yan 2014, 153). Globally, Beijing’s new policy led to the acknowledgement that the transition towards multipolarity was in higher gear. The “early days” of this transition - Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Beijing’s outstanding reaction to the 2008 global economic crisis, the formation of BRICS (2009-2010) - were giving place to new order-changing initiatives in which China had a premier role. The first and most prominent of them - the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - was launched by Xi shortly after he became president. While focused on international economic and infrastructure development, the BRI led to what Yan Xuetong had hoped for - an extended geographical network of political partnerships - and, accordingly, the expansion of Beijing’s “interest frontiers”, requiring foreign policy and security activities to protect them (Ghiselli 2021, 1).

However, China was not expanding its “interest frontiers”, nor implementing the BRI, just for the sake of seeking more economic power or indeed global power. Beijing assessed that the new initiatives were needed

to break the United States' "first island chain" (neo)containment policy in the Asia-Pacific, to provide reliable maritime and land routes through Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, and to secure its ever-increasing energy imports from Russia and the Middle East. Perhaps most importantly, it was intended to protect the fundamentals – territorial integrity and sovereignty – from separatism, terrorism and various forms of "colour revolutions", following a decade of protests: Hong Kong (from 2004), Tibet (2008), Xinjiang (2009), and the transfer of "jasmine" protests following the Arab Spring (2011). Moreover, the threat from Taiwan's "unilateral declaration of independence" (UDI) – which featured highly after the victory in Chen Shui-Bian from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taipei in 2000 and 2004 – was alarming Beijing after the United States and the European Union masterminded the UDI by Albanian separatists in the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija in 2008.

Despite gaining economic clout, China was thus facing growing challenges, to which it needed to respond by shaping the strategic environment in geographic areas of key importance to its interest frontiers. Shaping involves creating a "more favourable" international environment by changing relationships, characteristics and behaviour of other actors, primarily through attraction, legitimacy and persuasion (Wolfley 2021). In line with these attributes, and in order to achieve the objectives, a country needs to project its strategic narrative as means of political actors in international relations to "shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas" (Miskimmon et al 2013, 248). In turn, to align the words and deeds of the strategic narrative, and thus achieve the desired shaping, a country practices statecraft – "organized actions" governments take to change the "external environment" or "policies and actions of other states" to suit their objectives (Holsti 1976, 293). Aligning the strategic narrative with the objectives of shaping and means of statecraft is key to legitimize the power status in the international arena, be it at the regional or global level.

Yet, the dominant global power can allow other international powers to achieve these objectives only insofar as they fit its own strategic narrative and the international environment which it had shaped in its pursuit and maintenance of hegemony. As result, the United States, as the leader of the post-Cold War "unipolar moment", started to shift its policy of engagement with Beijing to the policy of containment of its rise. After a slow start of

Barrack Obama's "pivot to Asia" in the early 2010s, the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House in the mid-2010s sharpened and sped up the containment policy through tariff wars, sanctions, restrictions for investment and technological procurement, as well as strategic communication aimed at undermining Beijing's capacities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. His successor Joseph Biden pursued in the early 2020s the policy of containment with bipartisan support, charged with pushing U.S. businesses and countries worldwide to "de-couple" from China, and to fight for the preservation of the Western-led "rules-based order" (RBO) challenged by Beijing.

On its part, China relentlessly pursued its strategic objectives: the preservation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty; the breaking of the U.S. containment policy in the Indo-Pacific; the securing of its transport routes and energy imports; the expansion and protection of its "interest frontiers"; and the challenging of the RBO through initiatives harmonized with the transition towards multipolarity.

Crafting the strategic environment

The transition towards multipolarity is marked by "uncertainty and the fight for legitimacy of states in international relations" (Mitić and Matic 2022, 251). The underlying cause of this uncertainty is the tension in the assessment of the precariousness of the RBO between Western actors which believe it can still be preserved - albeit slightly modified to accommodate new realities - and non-Western actors which believe it is ripe for more profound, norm-changing challenging. Furthermore, the transformation of orders is "most often accompanied by wider destabilization and breaking out of a series of regional conflicts or even a global conflict" (Proroković 2018, 342). Thus, the competition over crafting favourable strategic environments - "the set of global conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of all elements of (U.S.) national power" (Training and Doctrine Command 2012, 2). To craft favourable environment, states vie for trust, legitimacy, and power using strategic communication through which they form, project and sustain a persuasive story about the international system, their own role and action. They project military, economic, political and cultural power through strategic communication as

a system of coordinated activities aimed at advancing their mission through persuasion and promotion of a certain type of behaviour (Mitić and Matic, 2022, 251). To do so, states and organizations forge “strategic narratives” as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and abroad” (Miskimmon et al 2013, 248). Strategic narratives describe the desired outcomes and seek to persuade other stakeholders to follow and assist in achieving them. Short-term objectives can be achieved by “structuring the responses of others to developing events” (Freedman 2006, 22), while long-term objectives imply that getting other actors to pick up the narrative “can shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations works and where it is heading” (Miskimmon et al 2013, 3). The strategic narrative thus needs to unveil how a political actor or state conceives world order, its identity within the order, as well as the policies it intends to perform to legitimize this identity (Miskimmon et al 2013). Then, in the process of strategic communication, it needs to perform shaping through aligning words (geopolitical storylines/framing) and deeds (statecraft repertoires/geopolitical scripts).

Shaping has been intrinsic to every global power. Through centuries, in seeking to “shape the international system in accordance with its own values” (Kissinger 1994, 17), or more recently, in exercising soft power “to shape the preferences of others” (Nye 2005, 5). Shaping, of course, does not exist outside the historical context. Political actors are “free to make choices, but their choices are shaped by the structures and history they and their predecessors have made”, and thus the “interactive shaping of choices is also a sequential process” (Rasler and Thomson 1989). Or, as Krasner argues, “once an historical choice is made, it both precludes and facilitates alternative future choices” (Krasner 1984, 225). Thus, for example, for current Eurasian affairs it is important to source current security shaping in past “imperial legacy” (Mankoff 2022). In terms of security environment, “military shaping” is key, and it implies “the use of military to proactively build a more favourable environment by changing military relationships, the characteristics of other militaries, or the behaviour of allies” through attraction, socialization, delegation and assurance (Wolfley 2022). Wolfley argues that “shaping relies primarily on attraction, legitimacy, persuasion, and positive incentives and less on uses or threats of force” (Wolfley 2021).

Thus, shaping requires the use of persuasion by words and deeds. In terms of words, shaping requires “geopolitical storylines” as sets of arguments which provide “a relatively coherent sense-making narrative for a foreign policy challenge” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). To boost these storylines, political actors apply “frames” to provoke reactions of the public on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. They do so through “strategic framing”, as an integral part of strategic communication which seeks to “use message frames to create salience for certain aspects of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). Strategic framing can be applied by both governments and activist groups, but at every level of the process, what is evident is intention (Mitić 2018, 123). As far as deeds are concerned, in international politics, states practice “statecraft” – “organized actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives set by policymakers” (Holsti 1976, 293). States use four types of statecraft instruments – military, political, diplomatic and cultural – to “influence others in the international system – to make their friends and enemies behave in ways that they would have otherwise not” (Goddard et al 2019, 306). Furthermore, states use “sets of repertoires” as “more limited toolkits in use, whether by particular states, in relations among specific states, or in specific settings” (Goddard et al 2019, 310). These sets of statecraft repertoires align with what O’Tuathail calls “geopolitical scripts” – “tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations, and how they are to articulate responses to policy challenges and problems” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). These scripts need to be flexible enough to harmonize, depending on the situation, context or development, with the set of statecraft repertoire a state can employ. Furthermore, they must make sure to connect the words and the deeds, and “to close the say-do gap” as one of the key elements of successful strategic communication (Mitić 2018, 143).

The evolution of Beijing’s strategic assessment

Seventy years since first presented by then Prime Minister of China Zhou Enlai in December 1953, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence continue to be the official basis of China’s foreign policy engagement. The Five Principles – mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity,

mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence - were included in the 1982 Constitution of the PRC, and Beijing has, since the transition towards multipolarity, called to "build the new international order" on their basis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2023a). However, during the Cold War period, the Korean War (1950-1953) and the border conflicts with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969) and Vietnam (1979) weakened Beijing's capabilities to project power regionally and globally (Lanteigne 2020). On the other side, after two uneasy decades since the formation of the PRC, from the early 1970s, Washington saw Beijing as a partner in Soviet containment, and assisted in its economic rise through globalization, particularly after Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening-up" and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979. This engagement continued even after the 1989 events on Tienanmen square. In the early 1990s, as the U.S. was boasting about its Cold War triumph and losing interest in China as balancing power against the Soviet Union, Beijing reached extraordinary economic growth and settled its border disputes with Russia and the Central Asian states. Beijing hosted the signing of the formation of the "The Shanghai Five group" (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) in 1996, a precursor of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization launched in 2001. Rising production also meant expanding the urge to guarantee energy security, as China became dependent on oil import from 1993, a problem it tried to resolve by rounding up the establishment of diplomatic relations with all countries of the Middle East (Erickson and Collins 2010, 90).

However, Beijing's relations with Washington soured as the U.S. "unipolar moment" metastasized into the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the killing of three Chinese journalists and the wounding of 20 employees. The public outcry in China strengthened anti-Western sentiment and left a "scar of deep mistrust" between Beijing and Washington (Lampton 2014, 118). In the aftermath, China adopted its "New Security Concept", which, according to Ghiselli, aimed to "improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to the US global dominance, especially after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by the US aviation brought fear to the top of the Chinese civilian and military leadership of the onset of a new era of the US unilateralism" (Ghiselli 2021,

23). Officials of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) saw the bombing as a "lethal blow to the slowly recovering authority of the UN", which will "negatively affect the security environment in Asia", predicting future American unilateralism in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula (Ghiselli 2021, 51-52). China became worried about the formation of U.S.-led "coalitions of the willing" and the implications it might have on international interference on the questions of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Pang 2005, 88). These worries were strengthened following the election of the independentist leader in Taipei, Chen Shui-Bian in 2000. Furthermore, as "colour revolutions" started to flourish around the Russian Federation ("Rose revolution" in Georgia in 2003, "Orange revolution" in Ukraine in 2004, "Pink revolution" in Kyrgyzstan in 2005), Beijing witnessed increasing pressure of protests on its territory: in Hong Kong from 2004, in Tibet in 2008, in Xinjiang in 2009. Furthermore, despite strong warnings by Moscow and Beijing, Washington and Brussels orchestrated the "unilateral declaration of independence" by Albanian separatists in Kosovo and Metohija in 2008, nine years after the NATO aggression, and in yet another violent breach of international law regarding Serbia's southern province.

Another challenge for China and its global economic power projection was the challenge to its transportation routes. While a more assertive positioning on the question of the Paracel and Spratly island chains in the South China Sea was to be expected, Beijing also sent its first "anti-pirate task force" in the Gulf of Aden in 2008. Part of the Suez Canal shipping route between the Arabian and Mediterranean seas, the Aden Gulf had been a scene the previous year of attacks or hijacking of more than 250 civilian ships, during which 50 Chinese seamen had been taken hostage by Somali pirates (Zhao 2022). Years later, it would be clear that this operation had also its implications for the demonstration of power projection of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) far from China's coast (Henry 2016). In 2009, China performed its largest overseas evacuation up to then, by airlifting 1,300 Chinese citizens from Kyrgyzstan following deadly ethnic clashes (Xinhua 2010). Yet, this operation appeared minor in size the following year, in early 2011, when China evacuated 36,000 citizens from Libya ahead of the Western bombing. In the aftermath, the "People's Liberation Army Daily" published an article arguing that the events in Libya marked a "turning point for Chinese foreign policy" – a "crisis in a third country had never impacted Chinese interests abroad as much as this one" and "interest

frontiers” – as “the geographical space that is defined (and constantly redefined) by the evolution of China’s interests and the threats to them – had never been so far from its geographical borders” (Ghiselli 2021, 1). Ghiselli argued that the need to protect these “interest frontiers” had become a “powerful factor in the equation of Chinese foreign policy”, causing the “transformation of the Chinese foreign and security policy machine” and “expansion of China’s security footprint overseas” (Ghiselli 2021, 1).

In parallel, the U.S. was becoming more critical of the PLA moves in the South China Sea – including the deployment of anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD)-type weapons – and increasingly worried about China’s growing interconnectedness between economic and military power. Washington reacted by publishing the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine in 2009-2010, aimed at countering and confronting China’s growing military capabilities (Ford, 2017), and by claiming through U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the South China Sea was a matter of U.S. national interest. Such moves set the scene for Barrack Obama’s “pivot to Asia”, but also irritated Beijing.

Chinese foreign policy scholars increasingly discussed about the limits of foreign policy and security non-interference. Critics of the concept of non-interference considered the times had changed since 1953 and that China’s global stature and interests had expanded far away from its geographic borders. They argued that China should be more assertive in defending its own, and the interests of its allies. On the other side, defenders of the concept of non-interference feared a change might be counter-productive for the fight against Western interference in Chinese own internal matters, and that it might appear repulsive to its neighbours. Chen argued that the debate led to a “loose consensus” for a “modest pragmatic adjustment of the non-interference policy”, following the concepts of “constructive” and “creative” involvement that must be clearly distinguished from Western-style interventionism (Chen 2019, 90-92). Furthermore, Chen argued that the thought of Chinese realists became dominant over two other currents among Beijing’s foreign policy scholars – the anti-Western view of Marxism with Chinese characteristics, and the globalist view of liberalism with Chinese characteristics. In turn, the realist school divided between defensive and offensive realists. Defensive realists expressed worry about China’s capacities to have a more active role in global hotspots, while offensive realists considered that Beijing should be more assertive in the use of its

power and diplomatic influence, both to promote its own and the interests of its allies (Chen 2019, 95). One of China's most prominent foreign policy scholars, Yan Xuetong, himself an offensive realist, argued in favour of shifting from the economic profit of Deng Xiaoping's "hide capabilities and bide time" to a policy of "striving for achievement" which allows for more political allies in the international arena. Yan argued that the difference between the two concepts was that, as opposed to the earlier policy which focused on China's own economic gains, "striving for achievement" centered on political support and morality which was strengthening the political legitimacy of a rising power (Yan 2014, 153). On the other side, Chen argued that the consensus on keeping the non-interference principle, albeit modified, allowed Beijing to "float above some of the world's difficult trouble spots without getting sucked into messy political disputes" (Chen 2019, 99). He mentioned the case of the conflict in Ukraine from early 2014 on, where Beijing argued for the preservation of territorial integrity and non-interference, while at the same time underlying the West should take into account Moscow's legitimate concerns over Ukraine (Chen 2019, 99).

Nevertheless, upon becoming president, Xi actively promoted the policy of "striving for achievement". He immediately launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – aimed at developing the transportation infrastructure in developing countries, but also at assisting China's resilience to potential transport route denial by the U.S. and its allies. The BRI was also a demonstration of China's vitality and superior performance during the global economic crisis, and an example of why the old economic ways of the RBO were in need of serious reform. The sheer geographic scope of the BRI meant it would impact a large part of the world, but particularly Eurasia. New road and maritime routes implicated going in various directions. To the north, the possibility of the North Sea Route, to be developed by Russia, as a possible solution for the vulnerability of China's passage through the Strait of Malacca, its primary choke point on the Suez Canal route, which blockade would endanger both China's trade and its import of crude oil. To the west, a road corridor through the Central Asian states, despite the geographical obstacles and the security concerns. To the southeast, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 3,000 km infrastructure network connecting China's Xinjiang with Pakistan's deep water port of Gwadar in the Arabian Sea, as another option for overcoming the possible Strait of Malacca choking point. Further to the southeast, the building of thousands of kilometres of roads and

railroads in mineral-rich Africa, including the 2018 railway between Addis Ababa and Djibouti, home since 2017 to the PLAN first overseas military base, which significantly increases its power projection in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. With the creation of the “16+1” cooperation format in Central and Eastern Europe, the purchasing of the Mediterranean Piraeus port in Greece, its potential linking to the transport infrastructure projects through Serbia into Hungary and Central Europe, Huawei’s 5G network advances, and Chinese investment in Western European strategic industries and security-relevant infrastructure, the U.S. and the rest of the West became worried. Indeed, Beijing had demonstrated that “there are many authentic ways to maintain the BRI countries connected in security and defence policy, other than classical military alliance or through an international organisation” (Đorđević and Stekić 2023, 65).

The negative Western tone on the BRI and China’s foreign policy increased from the mid-2010s. The BRI was growingly framed as “illiberal”, “disruptive”, “divisive” and “geopolitical”, while the strategic obstructive strategic narrative incrementally progressed from questioning of intent and worry towards warning about the “BRI threat” and call to action against BRI-related projects (Mitić 2022a, 33-34). In Washington, China was treated as a “sharp power” that “pierces, penetrates or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries” (National Endowment for Democracy 2017). In Brussels, such framing was putting strain on cooperation of EU member and candidate countries (Zakić and Šekarić 2021). The Western strategic narrative put an emphasis on two particular groupings of frames. The first one was based on “systemic ills”, or flaws which Western authors considered as “endemic to China’s political and economic structures, values, rules, norms and practices, and considered as inherent and embedded in the BRI”: from fostering “elite capture”, “non-transparency”, “corruption”, “illiberal practices” to problematic investments and exploitation of low levels of resilience (Mitić 2022a, 38-42). The second grouping was related to China’s “geopolitical ambition”, or related China’s “geostrategic objectives in its rise to global leadership”: from “sowing division” within the West, to “using malign influence”, “entangling partners with debt traps”, and using propaganda and disinformation through anti-Western “wolf warrior” discourse (Mitić 2022a, 42-44).

This tone coincided – although it was not necessarily directly related – with the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House in 2017. Trump’s administration designated China as a “strategic competitor”, instigated a “tariff war” with Beijing, imposed sanctions and restrictions on Chinese officials and entities, lobbied Central and Eastern European countries to ban Huawei from 5G networks, reinvigorated the China-containing Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) format (United States, Japan, India, Australia), and increased arms sales to Taiwan, including F-16 fighter jets. Furthermore, the administration took a particularly harsh line towards the Communist Party of China (CCP), blaming it for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump’s administration summed up its strategic approach to the PRC in a document in which it claimed that, while the U.S. had expected an engagement with China would lead to its “emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder”, it became evident the CCP had “chosen instead to exploit the free and open rules-based order and attempt to reshape the international system in its favour” (White House 2020). Defying expectations, Joseph Biden only reinforced Trump’s policy. His designated Director for China at the National Security Council (NSC), Rush Doshi, elaborated the key elements of Biden administration’s strategic narrative on China. He argued that China’s “strategies of displacement” of the U.S. evolved in three phases: from blunting American power over China itself after Tienanmen and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989-2008), to diminishing U.S. power through building regional hegemony in Asia following the global economic crisis (2008-2016), and since, in the third stage, “expanding its blunting and building efforts worldwide to displace the United States as the global leader” (Doshi 2021, 4) Doshi’s words translated into a U.S. policy which Biden’s State Secretary Anthony Blinken defended by arguing that “we cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system” (Blinken 2022).

China’s new initiatives and shaping of strategic environment

Despite facing the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on one side, the threat of containment and de-coupling on the other, and the overall U.S. policy of “shaping the strategic environment around Beijing”, China did not go on the defensive. Rather, Beijing boosted existing and launched new global initiatives, pushing its own shaping strategy, particularly in Eurasia.

Belt and Road Initiative

Recapitulating in September 2023 the first decade of the BRI launch, *The Economist*, not too kind to the initiative since its inception, underlined that 10 years ago “no one predicted that the project would become a defining feature of (Xi’s) foreign policy and dramatic symbol of China’s rise as a global power”, and that “the West was in for a shock” (*The Economist* 2023a). The British magazine further underlined that “in many ways the BRI has lived up to the hype” as “more than 150 countries, accounting for almost 75% of the world’s population and more than half of its GDP, have signed on to the scheme” (*The Economist* 2023b). According to Chinese figures, the BRI has helped the GDP share of emerging and developing countries in the world to increase by 3.6 percent through some 3,000 projects, and it will lift 40 million people out of poverty by 2030 (Embassy of the PR of China in Grenada 2023). In Africa alone, the initiative has led to the construction or refurbishment of “over 10,000 kilometers of railway, up to 100,000 kilometers of roads, nearly 1,000 bridges and almost 100 ports” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2022a). Through promoting BRI connectivity, China has boosted connectivity to the rest of the world for landlocked countries in Asia, such as Laos, Nepal and Kazakhstan. Same in Africa, with Ethiopia, where the 2018 railway between Djibouti and Addis Ababa, constructed under the BRI, has helped the country link to the Arabian Sea and China’s maritime transport route – providing a major boost for the country’s successful 2023 bid to join BRICS.

Throughout Eurasia, the China-Europe Railway Express has opened a new Asia-Europe land transport route, with a particularly important role since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains. With the conflict in Ukraine intensifying since early 2022, there were worries that the corridor linking China and Western Europe through the Russian Federation would be threatened. Yet, figures paint a different picture. In the first seven months of 2023, more than 1.08 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) of freight have been transported between China and Europe through the route, a year-on-year increase of 27 percent (Blair 2023). The trip from Shenyang, in northeastern China, to Duisburg in the heavily industrialised Rhine-Ruhr region, the economic heartland of Germany, lasts 12 days. Along the route, ten overseas terminal stations have been set up, including Moscow. Transit countries, such as Mongolia and Belarus, have

considerably profited from transportation income. Indeed, in just a few years since its 2017 launch, the route has become an important part of China's BRI aim to reduce its dependence on potential Strait of Malacca blockage.

Yet another part of this strategy has been the CPEC corridor connecting China's Kashgar to Pakistan's Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. With the development of the Gwadar warm-water deep-sea port, it has become a connectivity regional hub, with benefits not only to China and Pakistan, but also Afghanistan and Central Asia. Gwadar has a key location at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, between Oman and Iran, one of the world's most important oil chokepoints, with the passage each of day of 17 million barrels of oil per day, an equivalent of 20 to 30 percent of the world's total consumption (Strauss Center for International Security and Law 2023). Thus, its additional importance China's energy security.

In Europe, BRI-affiliated projects have become showcases: as a key hub for BRI's maritime entrance into Europe, the Piraeus port in Greece has been transformed from decaying to Mediterranean premier and one of Europe's top five, increasing its capacity from 1.5 million TEUs to 6.2 million in 13 years since China's COSCO acquired its majority stake (Xinhua 2023a). Along with successful infrastructure projects in Serbia, and the perspective of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway - tying the Mediterranean to Central Europe along Corridor X - the case of Piraeus has maintained the interest for the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) format, originally the "16+1", despite the decision by the Baltic countries to exit the network under Washington's influence.

The BRI has also allowed China to demonstrate during the COVID-19 pandemic its "mask and vaccine diplomacy". China built upon its BRI-affiliated Health Silk Road (HSR) to launch the "Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccines Cooperation" with 28 countries, with the aim of narrowing the global immunization gap (Liangtao et al 2022). Although geopolitical competition, Western constraints and accusations of "exploiting the pandemic" affected its full reach, the "mask and vaccine diplomacy" had a considerable positive impact on the projection of China's soft power, in the Global South in general and in Asia in particular.

Although not directly linked, the BRI helped China with its diplomatic battle over Taiwan. Its policy of de-recognitions of Taiwan has been particularly successful since 2017, with eight countries cutting ties with

Taipei – in Africa, the Pacific and Latin America - thus leaving the number of recognizers to 13 - mostly small island states, the Vatican, and Eswatini as the only remaining African recognizer.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

China has seen the SCO as a mechanism to create an Eurasian security network without Western interference, a particularly important platform for multilateral discussions on security matters, and as a springboard for bilateral military cooperation. Furthermore, it provides to Beijing a possibility to get support for its key principles during SCO summits – including on unilateral sanctions, bloc and ideological confrontations (Khaliq and Latif 2023). In SCO expansion, together with Moscow, China sought to find a balancing act. This was already the case with the 2017 expansion to India – also member of BRICS – and Pakistan – a key country for the BRI connectivity. A similar act has been in process over expansion to Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Teheran had been in the waiting room for over a decade, it entered the SCO in 2023 only in parallel with the granting of status of “dialogue partner” to Riyadh. While Beijing intensified its military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, it participated in joint naval exercises with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman. In further proof of security architecture shaping in the Middle East, the SCO officially granted dialogue partners in 2023 also to Egypt and Qatar, while green light for the same status was given to Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. With the membership of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Belarus’ entrance in the 2024 pipeline, the observer status for Afghanistan and Mongolia, “dialogue partner” status for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Maldives and Myanmar, the SCO is closing its geographic gaps in Asia and the Middle East, while at same time expanding scope and mechanisms of cooperation. It is indeed sending a signal of what Doshi would call a “strategy of displacement” of the U.S.

BRICS

The BRICS decision on enlargement at the 2023 Johannesburg summit was, besides being historical, a symbol of the epochal changes in the direction of multipolarity. It can be perceived as a diplomatic victory for

Beijing and Moscow, which have been the key proponents of enlargement, while at the same time being considered in the West as key challengers to the RBO. Indeed, BRICS was founded in the context of the 2008 global economic crisis, at the outset of the transition towards multipolarity. While Western critics have put an accent on the economic asymmetries and disparities among BRICS countries, as well as to the geopolitical efforts to counter the G7, Beijing's perceptions could be interpreted in Yan's "moral realist" terms of primacy of seeking long-term political partners over immediate economic profit. The inclusion of the six new BRICS members appeared odd to some analysts. Yet, it is well grounded in China's strategic thinking and its initiatives. The inclusion of Iran and Saudi Arabia follows the SCO path of "parallel" acceptance of two key partners in the Middle East. The Saudi Arabian case is evident for its importance as largest oil exporter to China and key member of OPEC+ (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries plus other oil-producing countries). However, it is also highly symbolic for the process of de-dollarization, yet another strategic interest for Beijing supported at the BRICS summit, given that the petrodollar had been founded after a 1974 deal between U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Riyadh.

Ethiopia's case is yet another showcase of China's thinking about BRICS enlargement as the country's capital is connected by the BRI-built railway to Djibouti, home to the PLAN first base in Africa and a strategic point for the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. This link gives further depth to China's entry into Africa, where the competition over resources has greatly increased after the West imposed sanctions on Russia. Finally, the international public attention given to BRICS and its enlargement provides a strong impetus to China's strategic narrative as rising global power: China is against alliances, but is not against challenging the RBO. It is not against the G7, but it is against the G7 norm-setting for the RBO.

Global Development Initiative

Despite, being in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and facing increasing U.S. pressure, Beijing launched in September 2021 the first in a series of three global initiatives. The Global Development Initiative (GDI) was launched as a credible opportunity to encourage the achievement of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030. Set in

2015, the SDGs were lagging behind worldwide due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rising geopolitical tensions and the overall crisis of the neoliberal economic model. While compatible with the BRI, the GDI focused on tackling uneven and inadequate environment, and proposes cooperation in eight areas: poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity in the digital area (Center for International Knowledge for Development 2023). However, one of the key elements has been its immediate linking to UN multilateralism. The GDI was presented at the UN General Assembly, and it received in a record time the support of up to 100 countries within the Group of Friends of the Initiative, followed by the meeting of the Group at the UN Headquarters in New York. By linking its initiative to the UN from the start of the process, China showed not only its focus on multilateralism, but also the width of global support for its initiative. Thus, it set the scene for the GDI to be perceived as an UN-centered multilateral effort, rather than a geopolitical project – a labelling the BRI had received from the West. To the contrary, it was the Western BRI-countering efforts which could now be perceived as geopolitical. The Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) was inaugurated by the G7 in 2022 with the aim of competing with the BRI (Lemire and Mathiesen 2022). The EU integrated its BRI-combating Global Gateway initiative into the PGII, which strategic narrative focused on the superiority of values over the BRI. However, as with the BRI, the Western initiatives are once again a step behind the Chinese in the width of global support, as well as scope and pace of implementation. Thus, when he announced at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg the launch of a 10 billion U.S. dollars special fund to implement the GDI, Xi Jinping was already able to proclaim the fruition of 200 cooperation project in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean island countries, as well as the launch with UNESCO of the “GDI for Africa’s future” action plan (CGTN 2023).

Global Civilization Initiative

Xi Jinping announced the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) in March 2023, calling for the respect of diversity of civilizations, the diversified paths to modernization and people-to-people exchange. His arguments suggest an

opposition to Westernization as the only model of modernisation, and to Western values as universal. The appeal of these ideas is particularly high in Asia, where a number of countries have created their own sustainable models of development and modernization, without necessarily aligning with Western norms of the RBO. Same with the idea of protecting the diversity and heritage of traditional values. In a clear reference to the West, Xi called to “refrain from imposing their own values or models on others”, “from stoking ideological confrontation” and from “feelings of superiority” (Xinhua 2023b). As with the GDI, Beijing sought and obtained support at the multilateral level, as the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, Miguel Angel Moratinos, called for close coordination between the GCI and the United Nations (UNAOC 2023). The GCI principles are in line with Chinese principles of soft power, which Beijing projects through four main channels: promotion of Chinese language and culture institutes, external communication, educational exchanges and large-scale public diplomacy (Repnikova 2022). A particular point of focus in Chinese soft power projection has been neighbouring Central Asia, where Beijing uses the mix buoyant nostalgia of Silk Road imagery and modern people-to-people exchanges: it opened 12 Confucius centres, broadcasts 24-hour programmes in local languages, devotes important resources for scholarships, technical assistance and state-of-the art vocational training via its Luban workshops, named after Lu Ban, the father of Chinese architecture. On the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with the Central Asian states, Xi Jinping in January 2022 announced a number of initiatives aiming to boost Beijing’s soft power in the region: increasing in the next half-decade the number of sister-city pairings with five Central Asian countries to 100, providing 1,200 government scholarships to their students and offering 5,000 seminars and workshops to their professionals in various development fields (Xi 2023). In the security area, these efforts have included training of personnel and exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats, carefully balanced with Russia’s traditional military presence in the region. They have also allowed for more robust BRI and security presence. At the first-ever China-Central Asia summit, held in May 2023 in Xian – the origin of the ancient Silk Road route – Xi urged the Central Asian states to implement the principles of the GDI, but also to help “strengthen capacity building on law enforcement, security and defence, support their independent efforts to

safeguard regional security and fight terrorism, and work with them to promote cyber-security” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2023).

Global Security Initiative

Among China’s three new initiatives, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) has received the most public attention worldwide. Xi Jinping announced the GSI two months after the beginning of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, at the Boao Forum for Asia Conference in April 2022, and set outright the context of his proposal: “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 2022b). China’s president received support from Moscow for the idea of the GSI, and on his first trip abroad since the COVID-19 pandemic, he presented the idea at the SCO summit in Samarkand, receiving support from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Freeman and Stephenson 2022). He continued to garner support at the multilateral level – proposing it at the UN level on the occasion of the International Peace Day – and at the G20 Bali summit. Yet, the main presentation of the GSI occurred on February 21, 2023, when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its “Concept paper”, with six core concepts and principles, 20 priorities of cooperation and five platforms and mechanisms of cooperation. The six core concepts and principles were in line with China’s long-standing vision of global security. First, the need for a new vision of security – common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable – a concept which had already been introduced by Xi in 2014. It calls for the respect of security of every country, peaceful negotiation and political dialogue, as well as coordination and cooperation in security governance. Second, the respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, firmly supported by China in its Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence. Third, deep commitment to the principles of the UN Charter, underlying that “the Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism contradict the spirit of the UN Charter and must be resisted and rejected”. Fourth, commitment to indivisible security, taking the legitimate security of all countries seriously and arguing that “security of one country should not come at the expense of that of others”. Fifth, commitment to peaceful and negotiated solutions instead of war and unilateral sanctions, including calls to countries to “strengthen strategic

communication, enhance mutual security confidence, diffuse tensions, manage differences and eliminate the root causes of crises". Finally, sixth, 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 "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 2023c). In a bold strategic communication move, Beijing presented three days later, on the occasion of the first anniversary of Russia's operation, its "Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis". The plan underlines in its first point the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, yet added that "double standards must be rejected", a clear poke in the direction of the RBO, and a reference to the different treatment of cases of territorial integrity of Ukraine and Serbia, which territorial integrity the West breached by masterminding the 2008 UDI of the Albanian separatists in Kosovo. The second point of the plan argues against "Cold War mentality" and security "at the expense of others", including that "the security of a region should be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs". The clear reference to NATO's expansion towards Russia as the source of the conflict in Ukraine adds to Beijing's stand on its own harsh opposition to the U.S.-led China-containment policy in the Indo-Pacific through military partnerships and networks creating the base for a future "Asian NATO". This point, together with point 10 reference to opposition to "the abuse of unilateral sanctions" particularly irritated Western officials.

However, the Western states were not the primary target of China's strategic communication of the GSI. This was particularly evident when, two weeks after the presentation of the Concept paper, Beijing hosted a stunning shuttle diplomacy success, bringing together Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish diplomatic relations. While it was in itself surprising, the indicators for such development could be seen in the last several years of balanced treatment and parallel inclusion of the Riyadh and Teheran in the SCO, and a bit later, into BRICS. Beijing wanted to make sure that its diplomatic success was a "successful application of the GSI" (Global Times 2023a) and that it would have "exert far-reaching influence on other hotspot issues" (Global Times 2023b). The Iran-Saudi Arabia deal boosted the GSI

and led to more acceptance in the Global South in the coming months. In the West, the reception of the GSI was harsh, as it was labelled “anti-US”, “anti-NATO”, and 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 and Gering 2023). China, in turn, has continued to use the GSI and harshly criticize the U.S. and its allies for trying to create a series of China-containing alliances: from AUKUS (Australia, UK, US), to the QUAD, the U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral summit in Camp David, the deal on new U.S. bases in the Philippines and a new 10-billion dollars package of military assistance to Taiwan. China has answered to the trend of U.S. containment by extending further its “interest frontiers”, as witnessed by the bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, the joint drills with Russia and South Africa in the Indian Ocean, as well as with Russia and Iran in the Gulf of Oman. Furthermore, the GSI allows for cooperation on joint efforts to tackle the terrorist threat. This is particularly relevant for the case of the terrorist threat from the “Liberation Army of Baluchistan” on the China-CPEC corridor in Pakistan, around Gwadar, as well from the “Islamist Movement of Eastern Turkistan” in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan, affiliated with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, and threatening to destabilize Xinjiang (Mitić 2022b).

Conclusion

Faced with increasing U.S. attempts to shape the strategic environment “around Beijing”, China’s statecraft reinvigorated existing and launched new global initiatives. China’s main goals of shaping a favourable strategic environment are in line with the protection of its fundamental national interests, the expansion and defence of its ever-growing “interest frontiers”, and the projection of its global economic, political and security power. These have included: protecting territorial integrity and sovereignty; breaking the constraints of U.S. containment in the Indo-Pacific; securing energy imports and key maritime and land routes; preserving its key role in the global value chain; and challenging what it perceives as decaying RBO in favour of multipolarity.

China's initiatives have demonstrated an important role in the shaping of a strategic environment which facilitates its key interests. First, in line with the proclaimed policy of "striving for achievement", they have strengthened the multilateral width of political partners and the depth of global issues in need of new or alternative models and policies. Second, they have demonstrated China's capacity to align words with deeds, reinforcing its strategic communication. Third, they have allowed for concrete responses to strategic challenges, such as the U.S. containment policy in the Indo-Pacific or security challenges in Central Asia. Fourth, they allowed for the demonstration of China's pro-active diplomatic statecraft at the global level. Fifth, they further expanded China's "interest frontiers" and their protection – from Eurasia to Africa and beyond. Finally, they have strengthened China's strategic narrative about the need to challenge the RBO and favour policies and norms which can more adequately reflect and sustain the transition towards multipolarity.

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