

## SHARED FUTURE IN FRAGMENTED WORLD: HOW TO RECONCILE IT?

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**Abstract:** In recent years, China has advanced the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind” as a cornerstone of its foreign policy and global strategic vision. Emerging against a backdrop of growing global fragmentation—marked by geopolitical rivalry, economic inequality, cultural misunderstanding, and weakening multilateral institutions—this concept aims to offer an alternative framework for international cooperation and global governance. This article investigates the intellectual roots, political motivations, and global reception of this vision, focusing on its practical manifestation through four key Chinese initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Together, these initiatives form a comprehensive diplomatic architecture through which China seeks to promote connectivity, sustainable development, security cooperation, and cultural dialogue on a global scale. While each initiative targets specific domains—economic infrastructure (BRI), development policy (GDI), peace and stability (GSI), and intercivilizational understanding (GCI)—they are united by a broader ambition to reshape the global order toward a more multipolar, inclusive, and interdependent future. This article critically assesses both the opportunities and the challenges inherent in China’s approach. It examines international perceptions, varying levels of endorsement and skepticism, and the tension between China’s normative rhetoric and its strategic interests. Ultimately, the paper argues that the success of the “shared future” paradigm depends not only on China’s leadership but also on its willingness to engage with

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diverse voices and foster genuinely reciprocal partnerships in a deeply divided world.

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## INTRODUCTION\*\*

The international order in the early twenty-first century exhibits signs of deep and accelerating fragmentation. Power is diffusing from traditional Western centers toward a more complex multipolar configuration, marked by the rise of emerging powers such as China, India, and others in the Global South. At the same time, the liberal international order that dominated the post–Cold War era faces growing strain: global governance mechanisms are struggling to address transnational crises such as climate change, pandemics, technological disruption, and widening economic inequality. Multilateral institutions—from the United Nations to the World Trade Organization—are increasingly perceived as paralyzed by geopolitical rivalry and declining trust among major powers. Meanwhile, social and cultural polarization, the resurgence of nationalism, and competition over norms and narratives further erode the cooperative foundations of international politics.

Against this backdrop, China has advanced the notion of a “community with a shared future for mankind” as both a moral ideal and a strategic framework for global engagement. Introduced by President Xi Jinping and progressively institutionalized in Chinese foreign policy discourse, the concept is presented as China's contribution to addressing global uncertainty and reforming international governance. It calls for a world characterized by mutual respect, collective security, shared development, and intercivilizational dialogue—an explicit alternative to zero-sum thinking and bloc confrontation.

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Yet the universalist and cooperative rhetoric of this vision stands in tension with the geopolitical realities of China's rise and the skepticism it faces abroad. This paper therefore seeks to unpack the intellectual roots and political motivations underlying the "shared future" paradigm, examining how it functions as both a normative discourse and a strategic instrument. Specifically, it analyzes how four flagship initiatives—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—operationalize this vision in distinct policy domains. It also explores how these initiatives have been received internationally, identifying both areas of endorsement and sources of resistance. Ultimately, the study interrogates the central tension between China's rhetorical commitment to inclusivity and cooperation, and the practical challenges and contradictions evident in its global engagement.

### ORIGIN OF THE SHARED FUTURE CONCEPT

The concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" is rooted in a hybrid intellectual foundation that fuses traditional Chinese philosophical ideas, socialist political thought, and contemporary critiques of the Western-led international order. From a cultural and philosophical standpoint, it draws heavily on Confucian ideals such as "datong" - great harmony, "he er bu tong" - harmony without uniformity, and the emphasis on relational ethics "ren", as guiding principles for harmonious coexistence. These concepts underpin a worldview that privileges moral order, interdependence, and the pursuit of collective well-being over individual or state-centric competition. Within this framework, the "shared future" paradigm positions China's foreign policy as an extension of an ancient civilizational ethos rather than merely a geopolitical project.

Simultaneously, the concept is infused with Marxist and socialist elements that have been adapted to what Chinese theorists call "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Drawing on Marx's vision of human emancipation and global solidarity (Burkett, 2005-2006), the "shared future" framework reinterprets class-based internationalism into a 21st-century discourse of inclusive globalization. It articulates a critique of

Western neoliberalism, which China portrays as having generated structural inequality and hegemonic hierarchies within global governance institutions. In this sense, the “shared future” narrative functions as both a moral critique of Western universalism and an attempt to reassert agency for the Global South in shaping the terms of globalization.

From the perspective of International Relations (IR) theory, the concept can be situated within constructivist and post-Western approaches that emphasize the social construction of norms and the plurality of global modernities. By framing China’s rise in normative rather than coercive terms, Beijing seeks to exercise what might be called normative power—akin to the European Union’s model—but rooted in non-Western civilizational values (Zhao, 2023). The Chinese white paper “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions” (State Council Information Office, 2023) explicitly defines this idea as a “new paradigm for global governance” aimed at creating “an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.” This reflects an effort to establish China as both a reformer and a moral leader in the international system.

Some scholars (Xiong, Peterson & Braumoeller, 2024) interpret this synthesis of Confucian moral philosophy and Marxist internationalism as part of China’s broader strategy of discursive legitimation—an attempt to frame its ascent not as a revisionist challenge but as an ethical alternative to Western dominance. Similarly, theorists like Yan Xuetong (2013) have emphasized „moral realism“, suggesting that great power leadership must rest on moral authority as much as material power. Thus, the “community with a shared future for mankind” operates as a normative narrative that blends cultural particularism, ideological continuity, and strategic adaptation—seeking to construct a distinctly Chinese approach to global order that both challenges and coexists with liberal internationalism.

## BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the foundational pillar of China’s global engagement strategy and the most tangible manifestation of the “community with a shared future for mankind.” Announced in 2013,

the BRI envisions a vast network of infrastructure, trade corridors, and digital connectivity spanning Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. It encompasses over 150 participating countries and has evolved into a multidimensional platform involving transportation, energy, finance, and digital cooperation. Through investments in railways, ports, pipelines, and telecommunications, the initiative aims to promote economic integration and sustainable growth under the guiding principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits.

From a theoretical standpoint, the BRI can be interpreted as an exercise in geoeconomics—the strategic use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical goals. While framed as a development project, it simultaneously extends China’s economic reach and influence, aligning with the notion of “infrastructure as power.” Scholars such as Callahan (2016) and Summers (2020) argue that the BRI represents a materialization of China’s long-term vision for regional connectivity that challenges the dominance of Western-led globalization. Within the constructivist interpretation, the BRI is also a form of norm entrepreneurship: it seeks to redefine global norms around development, sovereignty, and cooperation outside traditional Bretton Woods institutions.

Empirically, the BRI’s impacts are mixed. Many developing states in Asia and Africa have welcomed it as an unprecedented opportunity for infrastructure investment, job creation, and technology transfer. For example, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has provided critical transport and energy infrastructure, while in East Africa, projects such as the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway have improved regional logistics. However, concerns over debt sustainability have intensified. Studies by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlight that some BRI projects have contributed to rising debt vulnerability, particularly in low-income states such as Sri Lanka, Zambia, and Laos. Critics have described this phenomenon as “debt-trap diplomacy,” though the empirical basis of that label remains contested (Brautigam, 2020).

Transparency and governance also remain contentious. Many BRI projects are negotiated bilaterally and lack open tendering processes, leading to questions about accountability, corruption, and environmental oversight. Environmental scholars have warned of unsustainable practices

associated with large-scale infrastructure expansion, particularly in ecologically fragile regions. Furthermore, the growing presence of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and financing institutions such as the China Development Bank and the Export–Import Bank of China has raised concerns about dependency and asymmetrical bargaining power. From a dependency theory perspective, the BRI risks reproducing structural inequalities between the “core” (China as financier and contractor) and the “periphery” (recipient states reliant on external capital and expertise).

Nevertheless, labeling the BRI solely as a geopolitical instrument oversimplifies its multidimensional nature. In some cases, it has provided genuine development benefits, especially where local governments have exercised strong agency in negotiating terms and aligning projects with national development plans. Countries like Kazakhstan and Indonesia, for instance, have used BRI cooperation to advance domestic industrialization and connectivity agendas. Thus, outcomes are shaped not merely by China’s strategy but by the local political economy and governance capacity of partner states.

In sum, the BRI embodies both promise and paradox. It operationalizes China’s “shared future” rhetoric through tangible economic means, yet its success depends on addressing fundamental questions of transparency, reciprocity, and sustainability. Whether it becomes a model for inclusive globalization or a tool of strategic leverage will hinge on how effectively China and its partners balance ambition with accountability.

### GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE (GDI)

Launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2021, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) represents Beijing’s effort to reassert its leadership in global development governance by aligning its domestic and international policies with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The GDI emphasizes key principles such as inclusive growth, green development, innovation-driven progress, and people-centered cooperation, positioning itself as an alternative to traditional Western development paradigms (Alves, Gong & Mingjiang, 2023). It has received notable support among developing countries, particularly in Africa,

Southeast Asia, and Latin America, due to its emphasis on South-South cooperation and infrastructure financing.

Nevertheless, analysts have raised concerns about the initiative's institutional framework, noting a lack of transparency, governance mechanisms, and concrete metrics for project assessment (Zhao, 2025). Unlike the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which operates through formalized financial and infrastructural channels, the GDI remains largely aspirational in its structure, prompting skepticism about its long-term impact and capacity for implementation. Recent multilateral dialogues in 2024, including high-level forums involving the UN and regional organizations, have indicated a measured optimism among global stakeholders, although many continue to call for greater accountability and clarity regarding funding mechanisms and development benchmarks (UNDP, 2024).

### GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE (GSI)

Introduced in 2022, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) reflects China's strategic ambition to reshape international security discourse. Framed as a response to rising geopolitical tensions and what Beijing characterizes as the "Cold War mentality" of Western alliances, the GSI promotes a vision of indivisible security, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue. It explicitly rejects hegemonic blocs and zero-sum confrontations, proposing a cooperative security framework that ostensibly prioritizes stability and regional autonomy.

While the GSI's rhetoric has appealed to several Southeast and Central Asian states, who view it as a counterbalance to US and NATO influence, its operational vagueness and absence of detailed policy mechanisms have drawn criticism. Notably, China's equivocal positions on critical global conflicts—such as its ambivalence regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its assertiveness in the South China Sea—have raised questions about its consistency and normative commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. As a result, while some countries cautiously engage with the GSI, they remain wary of becoming overly reliant on a Chinese-

led security architecture that may prioritize Beijing's strategic interests over regional consensus.

### GLOBAL CIVILIZATION INITIATIVE (GCI)

Announced in 2023, the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) constitutes the most recent addition to China's suite of global governance proposals. Unlike the GDI and GSI, which focus on material development and security, the GCI seeks to promote a global ethic of mutual respect, cultural inclusivity, and civilizational dialogue. It aims to challenge narratives of Western civilizational superiority by emphasizing that all cultures possess intrinsic value and can contribute meaningfully to global peace and progress.

The GCI is closely tied to China's broader soft power strategy, utilizing cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and media outreach to project a more harmonious and pluralistic image of China in global affairs. However, critics argue that the initiative risks being purely symbolic unless accompanied by genuine commitments to pluralism and open dialogue within China itself, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities and freedom of expression. The GCI's long-term credibility will depend on its ability to foster reciprocal cultural engagement, rather than functioning as a one-way dissemination of Chinese values under the guise of mutual learning.

### INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION AND CRITIQUE

The reception of China's new global initiatives—particularly the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—is marked by a cleavage between the Global South and Western actors.

#### Reception in the Global South

Many countries in the Global South have welcomed China's initiatives, viewing them as opportunities for new development finance and partnerships that are less encumbered by conditionalities commonly

associated with Western-led institutions. For example, in the 2022–2023 AidData Perceptions Survey, 79 % of respondents said China actively supports development in their country, and 38 % preferred China as a partner for infrastructure—despite significant concerns over transparency, environmental effects, and corruption (AidData, 2024). This suggests that China’s offers resonate strongly, even among audiences that are cautious about project implementation.

China’s own diplomacy amplifies this reception narrative. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has claimed that over 100 countries have expressed support for the GDI, and more than 50 joined the “Group of Friends of the GDI” on the UN platform. In addition, the UN Secretary-General has publicly lauded the initiative for reinvigorating commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 2022).

### Western Skepticism and Critique

In contrast, Western scholars, development practitioners, and policy circles tend to view these initiatives with a high degree of suspicion or guarded rejection. A frequent criticism is the lack of transparency in Chinese development financing: observers note that many Chinese contracts include confidentiality clauses and off-book lending, which complicates external scrutiny (Horn et al., 2020; AID Data, 2024). Such opacity fuels narratives of “debt-trap diplomacy” or economic coercion, even if the empirical basis for some of those claims remains contested.

Another critique is the absence of standard environmental, labor, and social safeguards. Some Chinese-funded projects have been associated with cost overruns, community displacement, ecological harm, and weak accountability mechanisms in host countries (AID Data, 2024; Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2021).

Geopolitically, Western analysts see China’s normative rhetoric—“inclusive development,” “common security,” “civilizational dialogue”—as a strategic veneer that masks ambitions to reshape global institutions to better align with Beijing’s interests. The broad framing of China’s “Community of Shared Future” is often contrasted with contradictions in

Chinese foreign policy, such as its assertiveness in the South China Sea or its position on Ukraine. Some critics argue that China is deploying these themes to legitimize a post-Western order rather than to genuinely foster multipolar governance.

In sum, China's global initiatives are received differently depending on geopolitical position: celebrated by many in the Global South as new avenues for cooperation, yet critiqued by Western actors for lacking structural checks and concealing strategic motives. The tension between these readings underscores how ideational framing and strategic power are intertwined in contemporary global governance.

## CRITICAL TENSIONS BETWEEN RHETORIC AND PRACTICE

China's global initiatives face deep inherent contradictions between their normative claims and actual behavior. These tensions are not just accidental but structural, as the initiatives seek simultaneously to maintain rhetorical legitimacy while expanding Chinese influence.

### Transparency versus Opacity

China frequently promotes itself as a new model of development cooperation that is open, accountable, and “no one left behind.” However, in practice, many of its infrastructure and finance deals remain shrouded in opacity. Contracts may include non-disclosure clauses, and Chinese lending is often off balance-sheet (AidData, 2024). This opacity undermines external validation and invites suspicion.

### Mutuality versus Asymmetry

While Chinese discourses emphasize partnership and win-win outcomes, the actual power dynamic is often asymmetric. Many recipient nations become heavily dependent on Chinese capital, technical capacity, and institutions. In many Chinese-funded projects, the procurement and implementation rely heavily on Chinese firms and labor, limiting local

participation and capacity-building (AidData, 2024). This asymmetry can transform cooperation into dependence rather than reciprocity.

### **Sovereignty versus Influence**

China repeatedly underscores principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, contrasting itself with Western interventionism. Yet, the expansion of Chinese influence in economic, political, security, and normative spheres suggests a desire to shape norms consistent with Chinese preferences. For example, China's push for "indivisible security" under the GSI can be interpreted as a normative challenge to Western alliance architectures. Critics argue this reflects selective principles: China may accept interference when its interests or its definition of "security" are at stake.

### **The "Shared Future" Credibility Gap**

China's overarching rhetoric of a "shared future for mankind" relies heavily on projected moral legitimacy. But credibility hinges on whether Beijing can resolve the disconnects between what it says and what it does. If China continues to dominate project implementation, maintain opaque financial practices, or selectively apply norms, then the GDI, GSI, and GCI risk being perceived as strategic instruments rather than genuine contributions to global governance. The real test is whether China can institutionalize practices of accountability, pluralism, and reciprocity.

## **PROSPECTS AND PRECONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS**

The long-term success of China's global vision (including its development, security, and civilization initiatives) hinges on several critical preconditions. Without addressing these, the legitimacy, effectiveness, and influence of China's "shared future" paradigm may remain limited or contested.

### **Transparency and Accountability**

Transparency in contract terms, reporting of loans and investments, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards is essential.

Studies of China's overseas investment under the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) show that opacity in environmental safeguards and financing often undermines trust. For example, Tsung-yen Chen (2023) finds that China-led initiatives may lower environmental and social safeguard standards in infrastructure projects to stay competitive with multilateral institutions, thus triggering a potential "race to the bottom" in global environmental governance.

Similarly, efforts to build effective climate litigation frameworks (Zhang, 2025) are an indicator that China is trying to align legal institutional structures with its green development goals, but the practice remains uneven.

Without credible mechanisms for monitoring, open data, and independent or multi-stakeholder oversight, rhetoric is likely to be seen as aspirational rather than operational.

### Reciprocity and Mutuality

For China's vision to be accepted in the Global South and beyond, cooperation needs to be genuinely reciprocal: not purely donor-recipient or dominant-partner models. Studies show some positive environmental spillovers from China's outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) in BRI countries: Gao & Li (2023) demonstrate that China's OFDI has, in many cases, improved comprehensive environmental performance in many Belt & Road countries. However, the benefits are not evenly distributed, and the dependency risk is high if local capacities are not built or respected.

### Institutional Embedding and Legal/Normative Flexibility

China's conceptual framework, for example, the idea of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, is embedded increasingly in official policy and legal texts (e.g., constitutional references, whitepapers) assuring a degree of formal institutionalization.

But institutional embedding is not enough: there must be normative flexibility. China needs to adapt to different legal, cultural, and governance contexts; allow for partner countries to shape norms rather than simply follow China's model. Research into climate and environmental

governance in China highlights that policy effectiveness often suffers from weak public engagement and limited administrative flexibility at local levels. For instance, a systematic review of climate policies revealed that spatial and industrial heterogeneity, as well as insufficient public coordination, remain challenges.

### **Sustained Dialogue and Multilateral Cooperation**

Credibility demands ongoing dialogue among states, civil society, international organizations, and local communities. Multilateral forums (e.g. UN, AIIB, regional institutions) can provide platforms for oversight, norm setting, and dispute resolution. China's increasing participation in global climate governance and its rising leadership in terms of Global South cooperation (e.g. adaptation, green technology) suggest some progress but also highlight the importance of inclusive process.

Furthermore, legal innovations such as climate litigation frameworks in China indicate steps toward integrating domestic legal norms into international expectations, which may increase trust if done transparently and with public participation.

### **CONCLUSION**

A shared future in a fragmented world is not an inevitability—it is a choice, and one that must be made collectively. Reconciliation requires a blend of institutional reform, equitable economic cooperation, and grassroots cultural engagement. Only by integrating these layers can humanity shift from competition-driven fragmentation toward a resilient, cooperative, and just global order.

China's "shared future" paradigm embodies a vision of global governance in which development, security, and civilization are reinterpreted through principles of mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty, and civilizational pluralism. However, while China's "shared future" vision has the potential to contribute positively to global governance—offering alternative models and engaging the Global South more fully—it also faces significant implementation deficits. Without aligning words with deeds in

transparent, equitable, and accountable ways, the initiatives risk being seen (and possibly used) as instruments of strategic statecraft rather than genuine features of cooperative global order.

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