

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

China's Ambition to Reform Global Governance

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S*ummary*

China's deepening acrimony with the West and its neighbours will be important determinants of the success of China's global governance agenda.

In a speech at the 60th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 2005, Chinese Premier Hu Jintao outlined, for the first time, China’s vision for global governance. Premier Hu’s speech titled, ‘Build Towards a Harmonious World for Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity’ had called for strengthening global governance to ensure world peace and common development.¹ Two decades later, on the 80th anniversary of the UN’s founding, China, in a bid to “improve” global governance, released a concept paper for the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) on 1 September 2025.

This is in addition to the three initiatives, namely the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), all announced between 2021 and 2023. The Chinese leadership emphasises that these initiatives are key to achieving the vision of “building a global community of shared future”.² Amid the Donald Trump administration’s edging away from global governance commitments, the concept paper has fuelled speculation that the initiative could be a push to revamp the existing global governance system and, eventually, the global order.³

For decades, China maintained a low profile in global governance, showing little interest in taking on a prominent role. The approach was guided primarily by Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of “hide your strength and bide your time”, which forbade China from taking a leadership role on international issues.⁴ The underlying logic was to concentrate all resources on promoting China’s economic growth and to dispel any threat perception regarding China’s rise.

With the advent of President Xi Jinping’s “new era”, defined as the era of China’s national rejuvenation, Beijing has pledged to take on a proactive role in reforming global governance and “demonstrating the changes China seeks to engineer in the international order. In the foreseeable future, China could mount sustained efforts to put GGI into operation through expanding China-led organisations, making personnel contributions, or coalition-building around GGI with countries of the Global South.

The GGI reflects a changed perception of the external environment among the Chinese leadership. Hu in 2005, while referring to “stupendous changes around

¹ [“Written Speech by H.E. Hu Jintao President of the People’s Republic of China At the High-level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations’ 60th Session”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 16 September 2005.

² [“A Shared Future, A Better World--Implementing the Three Global Initiatives”](#), The Consulate General of The People’s Republic of China in Perth, 5 August 2024.

³ Lye Liang Fook, [“Inside Xi Jinping’s Push to Reshape Global Governance”](#), *Think China*, 19 September 2025; Henrietta Levin, [“China Showcases Global Ambitions at Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit”](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 3 September 2025.

⁴ Shin Kawashima, [“The Development of the Debate Over ‘Hiding One’s Talents and Biding One’s Time’ \(taoguan yanghui\)”](#), *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2011.

the world”, struck a positive note by advocating harmonious coexistence, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic political and socio-economic systems, which have since become mainstream in state-to-state relations. Hu had also noted the growing trend towards a multipolar world and applauded the proliferation of regional and global cooperation mechanisms, which he saw as pointing towards greater democratisation of international relations.

In stark contrast, the GGI concept paper at the very outset underscores three major drawbacks of the contemporary international system—underrepresentation of the Global South and the emerging markets; eroding authority of the UN; and lack of robust and sustained implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals along with effective governance in new domains like AI, cyberspace and outer space.⁵

Accordingly, the vision document calls for the democratisation of international relations, the uniform imposition of international law, the avoidance of discriminatory and exclusive arrangements, the reform of the global order to meet people’s needs, and the shouldering of greater responsibilities by developed countries. It is noteworthy that Beijing not only sees the reversal of the previous trend of peaceful and cooperative relations between states, but also perceives interstate ties as increasingly combative, with the threat of hegemonic control and external influence undermining domestic political and social systems. Similarly, the proliferation of international organisations, which was considered a move to improve the collective international balance of power, is now viewed as biased and restrictive.

This appraisal of the international situation is significant, especially given that China has emerged as a formidable economic, military and technological power. While it can be seen as a response to the escalating tensions with the US, it also carries deeper undertones. First, it marks a formal critique of the current trend of personalised conduct in international diplomacy, characterised by trade wars, deal-making, and a lack of consideration for international commitments. Second, emphasis on the Global South and emerging markets is unmistakably a move to mobilise support; it also indicates Chinese efforts to gain legitimacy. The widespread legitimisation of China’s views enables Beijing to take a leadership role in reforming global governance.

Finally, China recognises that new domains of power, such as outer space, cyberspace and disruptive technologies, are emerging as influential determinants in the balance of power between states. As Beijing races to become a superpower

⁵ “[Concept Paper on the Global Governance Initiative](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 1 September 2025.

in these emerging domains, the Chinese leadership considers securing a seat at the governing table in these areas crucial to maximising its leverage in international diplomacy.

In line with China’s view of the drawbacks in the current international landscape, the GGI concept paper proposes five “core principles” to strengthen global governance—commitment to the sovereign equality of nations, adherence to international law, practice of multilateralism, adoption of a people-centric approach, and a focus on taking concrete actions.

Mainly drawn from the principles and values enunciated in the charter of the United Nations (UN), the reaffirmation indicates two aspects. China intends to preserve the sections of the international order that prioritise state sovereignty, commitment to global rules and multilateralism. These tenets in Beijing’s perception help enforce non-interference in internal affairs (primarily regarding human rights and civil liberties) and establish a counterweight to the West’s unilateralism. Second is the support for an UN-centred international system. For China, as one of the founding members of the UN and a member of the UN Security Council, upholding the UN system helps consolidate its status as both an original contributor to the global order and a legitimate proponent of reform. Notably, one significant difference in Xi’s GGI is the absence of the clause on reforming the UN that was proposed by Hu in 2005.

The concept paper, towards the end, states that the GGI does not intend to alter the existing international order or create an alternative framework, but aims to make existing institutions and mechanisms more effective in responding to global challenges and the needs of developing countries. While China has emerged as a dominant power in the international security and economic order and has declared its readiness to take on a leadership role, the critical question remains whether Beijing will be able to reorient the global architecture to align with its strategic interests. China’s ageing population, slowing economic growth and deepening acrimony with the West and its neighbours will also be important determinants of the success of China’s global governance agenda.

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