

AN OBJECTIVE LOOK AT A CHINA-LED FRAMEWORK

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Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang during the Lanting Forum, in Beijing | Photo Credit: AP

In his keynote speech at the Lanting Forum in Beijing on February 21, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Qin Gang highlighted the recently unveiled Global Security Initiative (GSI) Concept Paper. The GSI is presented as a China-led framework that seeks to restore stability and security, particularly in Asia. Accordingly, Mr. Qin outlined five major pillars to effectively implement the GSI, i.e., mutual respect; openness and inclusion; multilateralism; mutual benefit, and a holistic approach.

While the promotion of such principles is timely and critical, given the current shifts in the international geopolitical landscape at the expense of the developing world, a practical assessment indicates that the GSI is tailored more to be an empty narrative to compete with United States leadership and dominant U.S.-led concepts. Consequently, with [the war in Ukraine](#) intensifying and diverging perceptions among developing countries vis-à-vis the West and the unfolding war, China is seeking to leverage these fault lines by promoting its vision as a capable alternative leader. However, an objective look at China's recent track record of external engagement paints a completely different picture of what to expect from Beijing's vision of a future security order.

The crux of the GSI's first principle centres on the need for countries to adhere to the United Nations Charter and international law while facilitating relations based on mutual trust and respect for each other's sensitivities. During these past few years, China has consistently demonstrated the exact opposite in terms of its relations with its neighbours. Along its southwestern border, China continues to ensure that its relations with New Delhi are provocative by not only unilaterally disregarding confidence building measures and bilateral agreements but also by constantly undermining India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Similarly, China is also increasing its assertive manoeuvres in the South China Sea by greatly militarising the disputed maritime territory at the expense of the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Further, in its complete rejection of international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China continues to assertively intrude and block the access of its neighbours within their respective Exclusive Economic Zones.

The second principle of the GSI lies in its openness to spearhead inclusive international engagements. While this position has been catalysed by the presence of U.S. treaty alliances in the Western Pacific, ironically, China also continues to engage in exclusionary policies in the East and South China Seas. Not only is this an outright rejection of freedom of navigation

enshrined in international law but it is also a display of narrowly defined interests to consolidate its sphere of influence in the region.

The third principle focuses on bilateral and multilateral security cooperation and consultations to address issues of concern with the parties involved. While China plays a prominent role in various multilateral institutions, its understanding of consultation can be seen through the prism of asymmetric power relations such as constraining members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from pursuing collective actions against Beijing's assertion. Moreover, China continues to delay the establishment of a crucial Code of Conduct for the South China Sea as it continues to bolster its military power projection in the disputed territory and indulge in various grey zone strategies.

The fourth principle highlights the GSI's prioritisation of positive-sum cooperation, where parties involved can equally benefit. While in theory, China's Belt and Road Initiative is a much-needed cooperative framework given the significant infrastructure deficit in the developing world, it is its disregard for international macroeconomic stability by funding unsustainable projects for countries with low or non-existing credit ratings that creates more debt burdens for these countries. Moreover, as another illustration of Beijing's disregard for its neighbour's sovereignty and sovereign rights, China insisted on receiving a larger share in its bid for a joint exploration of resources with Manila in Philippine waters.

The last principle of the GSI advocates a holistic approach towards traditional and non-traditional security threats, with an equal emphasis on eliminating any "breeding ground for insecurity". Throughout the years, the rise of China in a transitioning multipolar international system has resulted in power competitions with established and rising great powers (such as the U.S. and India, respectively) that seek to preserve and strengthen the established order. Rather than being holistic, China's engagements with these powers indicate a more narrowly defined goal for its power interests. In addition, China also continues to be a catalyst for insecurity in the non-traditional security realm, starting from its alleged lack of accountability regarding the COVID-19 pandemic to arming terror groups, such as in Myanmar.

Therefore, China's GSI is far from being a sustainable, equitable, and transparent solution to the growing insecurity that the world is facing, given an objective understanding of its track record in fulfilling its own principle requirements. Rather, the GSI indicates Beijing's attempt to counter U.S. leadership through narratives, regardless of whether it can effectively operationalise such initiatives on the ground.

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