

# Proffering Chinese Wisdom?

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At a critical moment for the world, with the war in Ukraine threatening to spiral out of control, China's leader, Xi Jinping, took a dramatic step forward with the announcement of the 12-point proposal on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis [see *Spokesman 154: Eurasia in the World*]. Just three days earlier, China released a concept paper on its Global Security Initiative that provided clarification on the rationale behind the 12-point proposal. Almost entirely escaping the superficial attention of the Western media, the concept paper sets out to explain the aim of the Global Security Initiative to seek to 'eliminate the root cause of wars and improve global security governance'.

There has been much angst-ridden speculation in the West in recent years over China's emergence as a more powerful global actor. What then does this concept paper tell us about China's intentions as a world leader? In such uncertain times, what solutions are put forward or is this just another self-serving agenda as with any other power? Is this China making an opportunistic grab for power as it sees the West's leadership apparently failing? Is the aim to counter NATO, which last year set out its own Strategic Concept identifying China as a security challenge, subverting the rules-based international order? Or does the document merely regurgitate the usual foreign policy rhetoric – a case of old wine in new bottles as one Western commentator put it?

## **The Global Security Initiative: background and principles**

The GSI was first introduced at a forum for Asian dialogue in 2022 and is best

understood as part of a series of initiatives along with the Global Development Initiative, put forward at the UN Summit in 2021 to advance the right to development; and the Global Civilisation Initiative, launched in March 2023 just after the GSI concept paper, advocating mutual learning. These three proposals frame Xi Jinping's aim to bring 'Chinese wisdom' to the world negotiating table.

In the wider world, thinking on security has broadened out to cover not just matters of war and peace, but also issues of economic security, climate change, pandemics and human rights. At first sight, China's document appears as a quick skate over a broad list of concerns citing also numbers of organisations and initiatives mostly associated with China itself. This makes the document look decidedly Sinocentric. However, it needs a deeper dive to understand its holistic approach.

The theme is co-operation: starting with principles offered as a basis for re-centring the UN and increasing its role. These are principles drawn from history.

Surprisingly, the first three elements of China's concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security are drawn directly from the original conceptions of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which, from 1975, in opposition to NATO's Cold War division and the spiralling nuclear arms race, sought to create a new security order for Europe, inclusive of the Soviet Union.

The OSCE concept of common or indivisible security – the idea that the security of one country should not come at the expense of another – is incorporated here into the GSI vision, and indeed into the 12-point proposal on the Ukraine crisis, as an alternative to the Cold War notion of security through military 'deterrence' or bloc confrontation.

Here in the paper there is also the Reagan-Gorbachev principle which ended the nuclear arms race in 1985 with the words: a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

At the same time, China's conception integrates the five principles of peaceful coexistence – principles of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit – which have served as the basis of China's foreign policy over the decades. Agreed first by Mao and Nehru in 1954, these paved the way for the Bandung Conference in 1955 when African and Asian states, newly emerging from colonial rule and under pressure from the Cold War, sought to protect their independence and avoid war through collective non-alignment.

For China also the UN Charter, as the concept paper states, 'embodies

the deep reflection by the people around the world on the bitter lessons of two world wars'. Drawing as it does from historical experiences of the wider world, the concept paper is far from Sinocentric.

Meanwhile the fourth element of the concept – 'sustainable security' – incorporates China's long-standing conception of the dialectic between peace and development: peace is essential for development, but development also contributes to resolving conflicts, 'eliminating the breeding ground for insecurity'.

### **Security as a process**

Moving on to the actors, the nation-states, there is another dialectic here between major powers and regional formations. Clearly, good relations between major powers are a necessity for world peace, not least in reducing the risk of nuclear war. The concept paper looks to the major powers to set an example in complying with the UN Charter and, when conflicts occur, their role should be to 'support consultation on an equal footing', facilitate peace talks, and to 'encourage conflicting parties to build trust, settle disputes and promote security through dialogue'.

China is often criticised as having a hierarchical world view which privileges big powers; however, it seems quite obvious that major powers have more responsibilities in preserving peace.

At the same time, the paper gives considerable space to enumerating regional contexts, each with their own specificities regarding security: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with its distinctive approach of consensus-building amongst politically diverse members; the Latin America-Caribbean zone of peace; African countries and the need to strengthen their ability to safeguard peace independently; the need for Middle Eastern states to construct a new security framework with the international community taking practical steps towards a two state solution to the Palestinian question; the security of the Pacific Island states in relation to the threat from climate change.

Regions, then, can be seen to have their own focal points of security cooperation, with major powers respecting their contexts, stepping in with support where necessary to facilitate these processes. The absence here of any mention of the European Union, United States or Japan suggests China is looking to the Global South for momentum. Security-building can be envisaged as a process, not only from the top down with responsible actions taken by major powers but also from the bottom up, region by region, bringing regional organisation into the multi-polar balance alongside the major powers.

The point here is to grasp the dialectic between the international and the regional. So, for example, in the case of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, China was able to offer a platform free from outside interference for the final stages of a process begun by regional actors themselves. In the case of Russia and Ukraine, what major powers can do in terms of nuclear arms control could have a bearing on resolving the dispute.

### **The Security Agenda**

On the contents of cooperation, the GSI ranges widely from digital and information security to terrorism; from biosecurity to outer space. By finding complementary points of cooperation, countries can form closer partnerships as the building blocks of a peaceful and secure world order. The recent Xi- Macron agreement ran to some 50 points; similarly, the Xi-Lula agreement. The ill-judged stance of the US and UK governments to deal with China – to confront, compete and cooperate – only concedes cooperation on climate change, ruling most of the GSI list off-limits.

So to answer the question ‘does China act to further its own self-interest?’, the answer is yes. But from China’s view, creating a safer world is not about selflessness and generosity: if one’s interest is invested in a deal, one is more likely to keep to it. That is surely what common security is about. The challenge is to find those points of mutual interest to build peaceful cooperation.

### **Cultural Relativism and Universalism**

China’s approach also looks to eliminate ‘the root causes of conflict’. So, for example, the root cause of the fighting in Sudan surely lies in desertification and land shortage. For China, NATO expansion lies at the root of the Ukraine crisis. Whilst international law is seen as underpinning the UN system, with morality and justice also taken as fundamental, China’s pragmatic search to get to the bottom of a dispute seeks to break through rebarbative cycles of blame and accusation. For Ukraine, this may be the hardest thing: people understandably want retribution.

From the Western perspective the law is absolute, but for China, how the universal is applied varies from context to context according to local conditions. At the same time, Western law-making is designed to uphold private property and individual rights, while China also lends weight to public property and collective rights. How are such disputes and differences over the law to be resolved? Is China to be cast as rule-breaker? The Global Civilisation Initiative, with its approach of mutual learning, might otherwise enable ways to be found of managing differences.

### **Conclusion**

The Global Security Initiative then demonstrates China's method or wisdom: a holistic approach focusing on the dialectics of global security, seeking out the interconnections and key links of the processes; the importance of summarising the lessons of history; and contextualising the universal in the particular, the international within the regional.

There are no concrete solutions to be found here: China is just beginning to learn how to be a global power – it is early days.

The point is first to understand what security is. For China it is not simply a matter of treaties and international laws requiring compliance but a historical process, working through the interactions between the international and the regional, the piece-by-piece of bilateral cooperative partnerships, the hard work of development over the long term.

China's GSI initiative represents an essentially state centric view – missing is the role of international mass movements for peace and against war. These were to prove a powerful force indeed, uniting in opposition to the nuclear arms race in the 1980s and then in opposition to the Iraq war in 2003. Today, the pursuit of human security has become more fragmented into single issue campaigns, also covering poverty as well as human rights and, of course, climate change. Now some of us in the peace movement are talking about the need to rethink security more holistically, re-applying the common security approach.

Questions remain: how can peace movements mobilise behind positive state initiatives and how are we to make people-to-people relations more effective in promoting the mission of international peace?