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Development, Civilisation and Stability: the key patterns in China's official discourse on the international stage

Beatrice Gallelli

Executive summary:

In recent years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has introduced four landmark initiatives—Global Development (GDI), Global Security (GSI), Global Civilisation (GCI), and Global Governance (GGI)—that collectively represent effort to reshape international norms. The analysis suggests that these initiatives represent a systematic consolidation of long-standing paradigms of China's domestic discourse—specifically the primacy of development, the diversity of civilizations, and the centrality of social stability—projected onto the global stage. By aligning its historical experience as a developing country with its contemporary diplomatic goals, Beijing seeks to provide an alternative framework for international relations that emphasises state-led modernisation and pluralistic governance. The brief explores how these paradigms bridge China's domestic political identity with its role as a key actor in the Global South, offering a distinctive vision for global order and dispute resolution through new institutions such as the International Organisation for Mediation (IOMed).

Policy recommendations:

- Adopt a “selective engagement” with Chinese initiatives.
- Identify areas of convergence where Chinese initiatives align with the UN and EU's goals.
- Counter narratives that subordinate individual rights to state-led stability or development.
- Create a new European lexicon and key narratives that avoid the trap of being perceived as paternalistic and that risk implying European superiority in the eyes of China itself as well as of the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

In less than five years, President Xi Jinping, has introduced four major initiatives designed to project a new vision for international relations. Collectively referred to as the “Four Global Initiatives” (四个全球倡议), these are the Global Development Initiative (GDI) launched in 2021, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) of 2022, the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) of 2023, and lastly, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) promoted at the end of 2025.

At a time when strategic communications and narratives¹ are becoming ever more crucial for exercising power in international politics, these initiatives signal the Chinese

authorities' growing confidence on the international stage and their determination to ensure that "China's voice"² is heard globally. These are not merely rhetorical embellishments but, conversely, means to provide a new representation and understanding of how international relations should operate, and of the guiding principles for interactions among states and within and among international organisations.

However, rather than being a radical departure from the focus and strategy of the PRC's foreign policy, the initiatives Xi Jinping launched represent the crystallisation of long-standing patterns in China's official discourse on the international stage. These patterns revolve around three interrelated paradigms: the primacy of "development", the diversity and equality of civilisations, and the emphasis on internal and external stability. Interestingly, each of these paradigms represents a link between China's domestic and international discourses.

In the following sections, each of these paradigms will be unpacked.

DEVELOPMENT COMES FIRST

"Development is the master key to solving all problems" (发展是解决一切问题的总钥匙).³ This sentence, pronounced by Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, well encapsulates the importance attached to development in China's politics, both domestic and foreign.⁴ It is thus no accident that the first of the four Global Initiatives mentioned in the introduction was precisely the one that concerns "development", i.e., the GDI. This one was first mentioned in September 2021 by Xi Jinping at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly, where he once again emphasised that "development" is the "priority" (优先).⁵

Chinese authorities' understanding of development differs partially from the definition used by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. For the latter, development is a multidimensional socio-economic process comprising political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Conversely, in the eyes of many Chinese leaders — dating back to Sun Yat-sen at the beginning of the 20th century —

development is a "technology-centred modernisation process"⁶ that places the greatest emphasis on the modernisation of the country, its economic growth and the "trickle-down" effect of increasing the people's living standard. In Sun Yat-sen's time, modernising the country was seen as the only way to save it from foreign imperialism,⁷ and this view has deeply informed the evolution of Chinese political discourse to the present day. The GDI is based on China's official understanding of development and represents an attempt to promote this definition globally.

Tightly bound to this understanding of "development", the Right to Development is conceived as the most important of human rights.⁸ Beijing has promoted this increasingly since 1989, shortly after the Tian'anmen crackdown.⁹ Notably, until the 1980s, in China the expression "human rights" (人权) was employed in official discourse in a pejorative sense, denoting an ideological and rhetorical construct developed within Western capitalist societies to conceal the exploitation of man by man. Since the 1980s—particularly following the 1989 Tian'anmen events—China has engaged more actively in human rights discourse to develop an alternative to Western conceptions.¹⁰ The first White paper ever issued by China followed the Tian'anmen crackdown and was titled "Human rights situation in China" (中国的人权状况).¹¹

More recently, in 2016, the State Council Information Office issued another White paper entirely dedicated to describing the meaning of the Right to Development and its protection and implementation in China:

The rights to subsistence and development are the primary, basic human rights. Poverty is the biggest obstacle to human rights. [...] Safeguarding the right to development is the precondition for realizing economic, cultural, social and environmental rights, and obtaining civil and political rights.¹²

This passage makes crystal clear the paramount importance attached to the Right to Development, which is understood not merely as one among other human rights, but as the most important. For Beijing, the argument is that the main cause of conflict is poverty and underdevelopment.¹³

A key aspect of the representation of human rights in Beijing's narrative is that these are collective rather than

individual. The preamble of the above-mentioned white paper specified: “Only through development can we protect basic civil rights of the people”. The specification that the rights belong to “the people” points to a collective understanding of rights in the Chinese legal tradition.¹⁴

Beijing feels entitled to act as a spokesperson for the Right to Development, given its status as the “largest developing country” — a status that Xi has specified will never change.¹⁵ In October 2025, China renounced the new special and differential treatment (SDT) in current and future negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), but clarified that this does not entail any modification to its “developing country” status.¹⁶

This status is understood not merely in economic terms but also as carrying ideological and historical significance.¹⁷ That is to say, its developing country status relates not only to its GDP but also to its past as a country that rose from poverty to become the world’s second-largest economy. China’s success in poverty eradication is represented not merely as its own success but as a contribution to humanity as a whole, offering a “development model that challenges the ‘Western-centric’ mindset and offers new options for developing countries.”¹⁸

DIVERSITY OF CIVILISATIONS

“Equality among civilisations” is another recurrent motif in China’s official discourse and lies at the heart of the GCI. This pattern is underpinned by the rehabilitation of Chinese traditional culture and the idealised representation of China’s “more than 5000 continuous years of history” that has been promoted since the 1990s.¹⁹ The reclamation of Chinese tradition as a source of legitimacy marks a definitive rupture with twentieth-century orthodoxy; from the New Culture Movement to the whole Maoist era, “tradition” was largely repudiated as the antithesis of socialist progress. Since the 1990s, however, the state has pivoted, reclaiming cultural heritage as a vital tool for securing domestic legitimacy and projecting national prestige on the global stage. The narrative of 5000 years of civilisation is, therefore, informed by the view that the contemporary PRC is the natural heir to the Chinese empires and a cultural lineage

stretching back to early settlements in the Yellow River basins. While this interpretation of Chinese history is well entrenched in Chinese official narrative — and occasionally echoed by international observers²⁰ — under Xi Jinping, it is becoming an increasingly important link between domestic and foreign policy.

A primary example of this synthesis is the romanticised historiography used to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In his 2013 speech in Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping invoked the evocative imagery of camel caravans traversing a “transcontinental route” to introduce the “Silk Road Economic Belt.”²¹ Yet, the term “Silk Road” is a relatively modern construct, coined in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen to describe Han-era trade routes along which Chinese silk travelled westward.²²

Therefore, the GCI narrative portrays modern nation-states as civilisation heirs who should be free to choose their path toward modernisation. By doing so, the GCI moves the goalposts of international legitimacy from political ideology to cultural heritage.

Parallel to this, the “diversity of civilisations” (文明多样性)²³ is deployed instrumentally to bolster the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs of others” (不干涉内政原则) (henceforth “non-interference”). Although non-interference is a foundational international norm, its definition remains contested. Beijing has traditionally adhered to a strict interpretation, rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence established in the 1950s.²⁴ While the interpretation of the “non-interference” principle has recently shown great flexibility,²⁵ the “Century of Humiliation” (百年国耻)—a period of foreign imperialist encroachment beginning with the First Opium War (1839-41)— remains the historical catalyst for China’s defensive posture regarding sovereignty. This interpretation creates a sense of affinity with those states that shared the experience of colonialism and imperialism, for which external influences are intrinsically negative.²⁶

Ultimately, by tethering “diversity of civilisations” to the principle of “non-interference”, China’s authorities utilise “culture” as the primary frame for ascribing meaning to political views, so that “cultural differences” are invoked to shield countries from foreign criticism on political issues, such as human rights abuses. This logic posits that human rights protections are contingent upon a society’s specific developmental stage and cultural heritage, thereby necessitating a pluralistic rather than universal approach to global legal standards.²⁷

“STABILITY OVERRIDES EVERYTHING” GOING GLOBAL

The last crucial paradigm informing China’s official discourse is the centrality of social “stability”. In post-Mao China, an explicit link was officially formulated between stability, economic development and reforms, encapsulated in the slogan “stability overrides everything”.²⁸ The equation was further consolidated in the 1990s with the emergence of “stability maintenance” (维稳 shorthand for 维护稳定), which became a mantra, especially in times of crisis for the leadership.²⁹

The emphasis on stability is grounded in the view that only a strong State can guarantee development, which in turn ensures social stability. At the same time, China’s long-term development strategy (structured through successive five-year plans) is presented as achievable only under conditions of sustained social stability. Under Xi, the concept of stability has increasingly merged with national security and been imbued with a nationalist tone, feeding into the broader narrative of national rejuvenation.³⁰

In the last few years, this discourse on security has also been extended to China’s foreign policy. Against the backdrop of ongoing global conflicts and the blatant violation of international norms by major powers, China’s official media have increasingly praised China’s “stability”. This praise is, once again, primarily due to China’s ability to maintain solid economic growth at home and to further promote global development.³¹ Beyond development, China’s cautious approach and its efforts to support diplomatic resolutions to conflicts are also highlighted. As one commentary notes:

from actively promoting political solutions to hotspot issues such as the Ukraine crisis and the Palestine-Israel conflict to working with like-minded countries to propose and initiate the

establishment of the International Organization for Mediation - these facts show that every increase in China’s strength adds another measure of hope for world peace.³²

The passage, published in English on the *Global Times*, is particularly noteworthy for underscoring the “stabilising” role attributed to the International Organisation for Mediation (IOMed), inaugurated in Hong Kong in October 2025. The IOMed focuses on resolving international disputes, with armed conflicts included but not constituting its primary focus. With its headquarters in Hong Kong, the organisation can be interpreted as a significant outcome of Beijing’s broader efforts to project the image of a “responsible great power” committed to collective interests rather than hegemonic ambitions.

In his speech at the signing ceremony of the convention establishing IOMed, China’s foreign Minister Wang Yi criticised, not too subtly, the United States for undermining “global stability”, through their trade wars.³³ At the same time, the rationale behind the organisation’s creation emphasises the lack of representation of the “developing countries” in existing global governance structures. The IOMed is thus defined as “an important platform for developing countries to promote global governance in a more just and equitable direction”.³⁴ In this sense, the initiative further reinforces China’s self-ascribed role as a leader of the Global South.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief has highlighted how the Four Global Initiatives launched by Xi Jinping in recent years are informed by well-established paradigms in China’s official discourse. Interestingly, the three paradigms identified – the primacy of development, the diversity of civilisations, and the centrality of social stability – have been promoted within China’s borders for decades and are now applied to the global stage. The analysis has revealed that most of these patterns are rooted in China’s historical experience of foreign imperialism, including its understanding of development. This makes them attractive for many non-Western developing countries. At the same time, their newly acquired global dimension gives China’s official narratives the potential to make them even more appealing to its domestic audience.

In light of the above analysis, it is important for the EU to:

- Adopt a “selective engagement”: identify areas of convergence where Chinese initiatives align with the

UN and EU's goals. Simultaneously, the EU should counter narratives that subordinate individual rights to state-led stability or development.

Dr Beatrice Gallelli is a Research Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali and an Assistant Professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

- Given that China's official narrative may find support in non-Western developing countries that share a similar historical experience, it is extremely important for the EU to create a new lexicon and key narratives that avoid the trap of being perceived as paternalistic and that risk implying European superiority in the eyes of China itself as well as of the Global South.

ENDNOTES

¹ Miskimmon, A., O'loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871264>

² "Tell China's story well and spread China's voice" (讲好中国故事, 传播好中国声音) was the slogan launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping to emphasise the need for craft a good narrative and a good image. 习近平: 讲好中国故事 传播好中国声音. *Xinhua* https://www.xinhuanet.com/zgix/2013-08/21/c_132648439.htm (accessed April 9, 2026)

³ 习近平在“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛开幕式上的演讲 (全文), <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/n100/2017/0514/c24-407.html> (accessed April 9, 2026)

⁴ Xi's phrase, as it often happens, has been since then repeated by China's officials and spread across official media. For instance Wang Yi, repeated it at the General Assembly of the United Nation in 2019. 王毅: 发展是解决一切问题的总钥匙, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/lhg_681966/xgxw_681972/201909/t20190928_9381062.shtml (accessed March 20, 2026)

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021), 习近平在第七十六届联合国大会一般性辩论上的讲话 (全文), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/lhg_681966/zyjh_681976/202109/t20210922_9586149.shtml (accessed May 7, 2026).

⁶ Rudyak, M. (2025). Development. In The Decoding China Project (Eds.), *The Decoding China dictionary* (2025 ed.). The Decoding China Project. <https://decodingchina.eu/key-term/development>

⁷ Sun Yat-sen wrote a detailed programme for the modernisation of the country that comprise infrastructural projects, resource management, housing and so on, envisioning also foreign help and collaboration. The programme is available at: <https://archive.org/details/internationaldev00suny/page/160/mode/2up>

⁸ The right to development — which was not explicitly mentioned in the original 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) — was formally proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1986, in the Declaration on the Right to Development] (Resolution 41/128), as an inalienable human right. The Declaration on the Right to Development is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-development> (accessed May 7, 2026)

⁹ Foot, R. (2020). *China, the UN, and human protection: Beliefs, power, image*. Oxford University Press, p. 201. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198843733.001.0001

¹⁰ Cavalieri, R. (2008). I diritti umani in Cina, *Cosmopolis* 3(1), <https://www.cosmopolisonline.it/articolo.php?numero=III12008&id=16> (accessed May 6, 2026).

¹¹The white paper is available only in Chinese. State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (November 1991). 中国的人权状况, http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/1991n/202207/t20220704_130710.html

¹² State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China. (2016, December 1). The right to development: China’s philosophy, practice and contribution [White paper]. Xinhua. https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-12/01/c_135873721.htm

¹³ Foot, R. (2020). *China, the UN, and human protection: Beliefs, power, image*. Oxford University Press, pp. 74-78. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198843733.001.0001

¹⁴ As Cao well explains: “after the word and concept of “rights” were introduced into Chinese from the West in the second half of the nineteenth century, the new word quanli (rights) has since taken on Chinese shades of meaning, not entirely the same as its English counterpart.” Cao, D. (2018). *Linguistic and cultural meanings of “rights” in Chinese*. In *Chinese Language in Law: Code Red*. Lexington Books, pp. 101–116. Moreover, also Elisabeth Perry traces the collective understanding of rights in Chinese contemporary political discourse to some principles advocated by Mencius, the most important interpreter of Confucius, pointing also at the need to understand peasants protests in China in their own terms rather than applying foreign framing of “rights revolution”. Perry, E. J. (2008). *Chinese conceptions of “rights”: From Mencius to Mao—and now*. *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(1), 37–50.

¹⁵ Xi Jinping says China will always belong to developing countries, *CGTN*, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-06-12/Xi-Jinping-delivers-video-speech-at-UNCTAD-60th-anniversary-event-1unze5GWxX2/p.html> (accessed April 14, 2026).

¹⁶ Xu Xin, China’s status as a developing country remains unchanged, *Global Times*, Oct 01, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202510/1344865.shtml>

¹⁷ Rudyak, M. (2023, August). China and the Global South: Many initiatives, one narrative. *IAI Papers*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2320.pdf> (accessed March 14, 2024).

¹⁸ Xu Xin, China’s status as a developing country remains unchanged, *Global Times*, Oct 01, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202510/1344865.shtml> (accessed April 14, 2026).

¹⁹ The expression 5000 years of history (五千年文明史) was first introduced in the political report of the CCP under Jiang Zemin, in the late 1990s. Since 2012, the official formulation is that China has “more than 5000 years of history” (五千多年文明历史). Gallelli, B. (2024). Jingshen 精神: A governmental keyword in 21st century China. In U. A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova (Ed.), *Discourse, rhetoric and shifting political behavior in China*, Routledge, pp. 70–90. ISBN 9781032537559. Gallelli, B. (forthcoming). *China’s New Era: Discourse, Communication and Language under Xi Jinping*. Routledge.

²⁰ Millward, J. (2023, July). Sinicisation, the tribute system and dynasties: Three concepts to justify colonialism and attack non-Sinitic diversity in the People’s Republic of China. *IAI Papers*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2317.pdf> (accessed March 14, 2024)

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. 习近平在纳扎尔巴耶夫大学的演讲（全文） http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zjyh_674906/t1074151.shtml (accessed March 25, 2017)

²² Millward, J. (2013). *The Silk Road: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199782864.

²³ This pattern informs also the discourse promoted by regional platform in which China is a main actor, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Seiwert, E. (2025). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. Bristol University Press, pp. 80-81. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529246957>

- ²⁴ Seiwert, E. (2025). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China's vision of international relations*. Bristol University Press, pp. 75-82. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529246957>
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- ³³ Remarks at Signing Ceremony of the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation <https://www.un.org/en/desa-en/remarks-signing-ceremony-convention-establishment-international-organization-mediation> (accessed April 10, 2026)
- ³⁴ The passage quoted is the following: 国际调解院是发展中国家推动全球治理朝着更加公正合理的方向发展的重要平台。Wu Qiong 吴琼，国际调解院为和平解决国际争端提供新平台，Legal Daily, May 26, 2025. Chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://epaper.legaldaily.com.cn/fzrb/PDF/20250526/05.pdf (accessed April 10, 2026).



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