

# Global Development Initiative: China's New Approach to the International Order

Shino Watanabe<sup>1</sup>

Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan  
Faculty of Global Studies  
Professor

---

## Introduction

While U.S. President Donald Trump's series of unpredictable policies has caused uncertainty and disturbed the international order, Chinese President Xi Jinping has emphasized that China would uphold multilateralism, safeguard free trade, and contribute to peace, stability, and development.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the world is paying close attention to China's response and attitude toward the current international order.

In this light, it is important to note that Xi Jinping announced three global initiatives one after another over the past few years: the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in September 2021, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022, and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) in March 2023. GDI merits special attention because it is the most institutionalized initiative and may have a significant impact on the major discourse on international development. This has the potential to reshape the international development order in the long run.

Why did China propose the GDI in September 2021? How has China implemented the GDI? What impact does GDI have on the current international order? Addressing these questions, this article argues that GDI is part of China's strategic approach to assuming a leading role in international development. China seeks to present an alternative set of ideas and principles for international development that are favorable to China and developing countries, aiming to become an agenda-setter in this field.

## China's Global Development Initiative

Xi Jinping proposed the GDI during his speech at the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in New York in September 2021. Xi stated, "Facing the severe shocks of COVID-19, we need to work together to steer global development toward a new stage of balanced, coordinated, and inclusive growth. To this end, I would like to propose a Global Development Initiative."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science KAKENHI Grant Numbers 23K22091 and 24K04763. I thank Dr. Chih-shian Liou, Dr. Chung-min Tsai, and participants in a seminar at the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies (GIEAS), National Chengchi University, Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> "Xi's Diplomacy Injects Certainty, Stability into Turbulent World," *Qiushi*, May 6, 2025, [http://en.qstheory.cn/2025-05/06/c\\_1090377.htm](http://en.qstheory.cn/2025-05/06/c_1090377.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> "Full Text of Xi's Statement at the General Debate of the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *China Daily*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/22/WS614a8126a310cdd39bc6a935.html>, accessed on June 14, 2025.

He also revealed six principles of the GDI: (1) development as a priority to speed up the implementation of “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the 2030 Agenda),” (2) a people-centered approach to make development for the people and by the people, (3) benefits for all, with emphasis on the special needs of developing countries, (4) innovation-driven development to foster new growth drivers for leapfrog development, (5) harmony between man and nature to achieve a green and low-carbon economy and green development, and (6) results-oriented actions through cooperation on “poverty alleviation, food security, COVID-19 response and vaccines, development financing, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity.”<sup>4</sup> In short, GDI emphasizes the perspectives of developing countries.

China’s choice to propose GDI to the UN in 2021 reflects its strategic intentions. First, it was an ideal time for China to launch a development initiative as the global economy was still recovering from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in December 2019. The economy has stagnated, particularly in developing countries, and global efforts to reduce poverty are facing significant challenges. Under these circumstances, China recognized that progress on the 2030 Agenda had been significantly hindered and thus seized an opportunity to propose the GDI, strategically aligning it with the UN 2030 Agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Second, taking a leading role at the UN in 2021 was a matter of the highest priority because 2021 marked two key annual events for China: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China’s seat at the UN in October 1971 and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China in July 1921. Thus, for China, the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly held in New York in September 2021 was a particularly suitable moment to propose an important initiative.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the UN holds special significance for China’s multilateral diplomacy. Amid the perception that China is challenging the existing international order, it needed to signal its intention to pursue development cooperation within existing multilateral frameworks centered on the UN.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, after the launch of the GDI, Xi repeatedly mentioned that China aims to strengthen coordination within multilateral mechanisms through the GDI and to uphold the current institutional arrangement by enhancing global governance through established international platforms, with the UN at its core.

Meanwhile, China’s approach may have significant long-term impacts on the international development order in the long run. China has been actively advocating for the specific needs of developing countries, needs that existing institutions have often failed to meet. Once such needs materialize, the current international development order will be significantly revised in favor of developing countries. GDI essentially serves as

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Li, Zhiqiang, “Lun Quanqiu Fazhan Changyi de Zhongda Yiyi (The Great Significance of the Global Development Initiative),” *Frontiers* (2022), pp. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Yu, Jiang and Jia Ding, “Tongchou Quanqiu Fazhan Changyi he Quanqiu Anquan Changyi de Jidian Sikao (Thoughts on Synergizing the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative),” *Journal of International Security Studies*, no. 2 (2023), pp. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Liao, Lianzhong, “Quanqiu Fazhan Changyi yu Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti Guojian (Global Development Initiative for Mankind),” *Shijie Minzu (Journal of World People Studies)*, no. 1 (2023), pp. 8.

a vehicle for China to increase its discourse power over the Global South.

## **Institutionalization of the Global Development Initiative**

China aims to achieve these objectives through the implementation of the GDI. Institutionalization has occurred at multiple levels, both within existing and newly established international institutions, and at global and regional scales.<sup>8</sup> This article highlights the steady institutionalization of GDI in the following areas: (1) building a broader coalition of supportive countries and international organizations, (2) facilitating the implementation of GDI projects and capacity building, and (3) allocating funds to GDI projects.

### ***Coalition Building through the Group of Friends***

China has fully utilized the UN to promote GDI. In this context, the formation of the Group of Friends of the GDI (*Quanqiu Fazhan Chengyi Zhiyou Xiaozu*, the Group) deserves special attention. China's Permanent Mission to the UN hosted an inaugural meeting of the Group in January 2022 at the UN Headquarters in New York. China formed a group to broaden its support for GDI and enhance its legitimacy.

The UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, former Minister of the Environment of Nigeria, and Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General and former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, were invited as keynote speakers for the meeting. Representatives from over 100 countries, including ambassadors from more than 80 countries and more than 20 international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women, reportedly participated in the meeting.

Since then, China has leveraged group membership to showcase its increasing support for GDI. Although ambiguity persists regarding the exact criteria for membership and which countries and international organizations are members, membership has steadily expanded over the past few years. By May 2022, 53 countries had joined the group.<sup>9</sup> Membership grew to more than 60 by October of that year,<sup>10</sup> and by July 2024, it increased to 82.<sup>11</sup> In August 2024, China revealed that 33 African countries were members, highlighting Africa as a key GDI region.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Wang, Mingguo, "Quanqiu Fazhan Changyi de Guoji Zhidu Jichu (International Institutional Basis for Global Development Initiative)," *Pacific Journal* 30, no.9 (2022), pp. 36.

<sup>9</sup> "Global Hatten Inishiatibu no Suishin de Ōki Buchō ga Yon Teian (Four Proposals by Minister Wang Yi for Advancing the Global Development Initiative)," *Jinminmō Nihongo-ban (People's Daily Online Japanese Edition)*, May 11, 2022. <http://j.people.com.cn/n3/2022/0511/c94474-10095250.html>, accessed June 18, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> "Shūshi Kawarazu ni Sekai no Hatten e no Kōken-sha de Aritsuzukeru Chūgoku (China Remains a Consistent Contributor to Global Development)," *Jinminmō Nihongo-ban (People's Daily Online Japanese Edition)*, October 12, 2022. [http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2022-10/12/content\\_78462299.htm](http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2022-10/12/content_78462299.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> "Fu Sō Kokuren Taishi, Gurōbaru Hatten Pātonāshippu no Tatenaoshi wo Yobikakeru (Ambassador Fu Cong Calls for Revitalizing the Global Development Partnership)," *Jinminmō Nihongo-ban (People's Daily Online Japanese Edition)*, July 17, 2024. [http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2024-07/17/content\\_117316064.htm](http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2024-07/17/content_117316064.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> "Kokka Kokusai Hatten Kyōryokusho: 'Chūgoku Afurika Kyōryoku wa Gurōbaru Hatten Inishiatibu Wakugumi-ka de Mittsu no Shinten' (China International Development Cooperation Agency: 'China-Africa Cooperation Has Made Three Advancements under the Framework of the Global Development Initiative')," *Jinminmō Nihongo-ban (People's Daily Online Japanese Edition)*, August 22, 2024,

China hosted a series of group meetings, such as a high-level online meeting in May 2022, the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development in June 2022, the Ministerial Meeting of the GDI Group in September 2022, and the first and second High-Level Conferences of Forum on Global Action for Shared Development in July 2023 and July 2024. Such occasions provide an opportunity for China to launch GDI-related proposals, publicize its achievements, and, more importantly, disseminate a set of ideas and discourses on international development that China seeks to advocate among group members and beyond.

### ***Facilitation of Project Implementation***

China has made deliberate efforts to ensure that the GDI is not merely an initiative; thus, the GDI has developed a mechanism for project implementation. For instance, in November 2022, China established the Global Development Promotion Center (GDPC) and Global Development Promotion Centre (the GDPC Network) within the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), a deputy ministerial-level Chinese government agency affiliated with the State Council.<sup>13</sup> The primary responsibilities of the GDPC include “publicizing ideas, coordinating policies, promoting projects, mobilizing resources, and expanding partnerships.”<sup>14</sup>

The GDPC also shares China’s ideas and experiences regarding development with its group members. In January 2023, the Innovation Training Base of the GDPC was established in Xiamen.<sup>15</sup> Along with a series of high-level forums for leaders of group countries and international organizations, the GDPC organizes seminars and human resource training programs at its innovation training base.<sup>16</sup>

The GDPC Network was built among group members, the UN, other international organizations, and think tanks to showcase the achievements of the GDPC. According to the concept note, the GDPC Network aims to provide “channels for development policy connections, consultations on joint actions, stronger multi-party cooperation and partnership consolidation.”<sup>17</sup>

As of April 2025, as Table 1 indicates, the GDPC Network has 75 members: 71 countries, four institutions (African Union, United Nations Industrial Development Organization [UNIDO], United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], International Federation of Red Cross, and Red Crescent

---

[http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2024-08/22/content\\_117381384.htm](http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2024-08/22/content_117381384.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> “CIDCA Chairman Speaks at Unveiling Ceremony of GDPC,” *China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)*, November 14, 2024, [http://en.cidca.gov.cn/gdpc/2022-11/14/c\\_831602.htm](http://en.cidca.gov.cn/gdpc/2022-11/14/c_831602.htm), accessed on May 11, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> “About the GDPC,” *Global Development Promotion Center of CIDCA*, March 31, 2025, <https://en.gdpc.org.cn/about-gdpc>, accessed on May 11, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> “Inauguration Ceremony of GDPC’s Innovation Training Base Held in Xiamen,” *China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)*, January 19, 2023, [http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2023-01/19/c\\_856934.htm](http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2023-01/19/c_856934.htm), accessed on May 11, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> “Concept Note of the Global Development Promotion Center Network,” *Global Development Promotion Center of CIDCA*, <https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdpcn/cngdpcn>, accessed on May 11, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Societies [IFRC] ), and Jordan as an observer.<sup>18</sup> These Network members are likely to overlap with group members.

**Table 1: 75 Members of Global Development Promotion Center Network (As of April 2025)**

Area	Member country and institution
Asia (14)	Brunei, Cambodia, China, DPRK, Kyrgyz Republic, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, the Philippines, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
Oceania (4)	Fiji, Micronesia, Nauru, Vanuatu
Latin America and the Caribbean (9)	Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Nicaragua, Suriname, Venezuela
Europe (2)	Belarus, Russia
Middle East (7)	Iran, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
Africa (35)	Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Dibouti, DR Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Mozambique, Mauritania, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Member institutions (4)	African Union, UNIDO, ESCAP, IFRC
Observer (1)	Jordan
Source: Website of the Global Development Promotion Center ( <a href="https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdpcn/mlgdpcn">https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdpcn/mlgdpcn</a> )	

China established the Global Development Project Pool (Project Pool) and Global Development Capital Pool (Capital Pool) to support group members. The Project Pool is a list of projects that were both achieved and incubated. According to the GDPC website, the number of “complete projects, goods and materials, and technical cooperation” was 440—417 in the achievement pool and 23 in the incubation pool, and that of “human resources development cooperation” was 693—200 implemented and 493 approved, although the date period was unclear.

<sup>18</sup> “Member List of Global Development Promotion Center Network,” <https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdpcn/mlgdpcn>, accessed on May 11, 2025.

In terms of areas, it is assumed that a project can fall into multiple categories: 600 projects for poverty reduction, 272 for industrialization, 164 for food security, 141 for pandemic response and vaccines, 139 for the digital economy, 70 for financing development, 45 for climate change and green development, and 38 for digital-era connectivity. Regarding area distribution, Asia (39.7%) and Africa (36.5%) were the two most significant areas, followed by North America (8.7%), Multilateral (5.3%), Oceania (4.9%), Europe (2.8%), and South America (2.1%).<sup>19</sup>

The Capital Pool is a list of potential funders for project-pool projects. According to “Guidelines on Global Development Capital Pool (provisional),” Capital Pool provides “financial support” for Incubation Pool projects. Capital Pool is under the management of the CIDCA, and “(e)ntities that have the will and ability to fund the Global Development Project Pool projects may participate in the financing of Global Development Capital Pool.” Potential funders are specified as follows: Chinese entities, UN agencies, and other international organizations, as well as entities from various countries that are either in consultation with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or are recognized by China.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, the Capital Pool technically enables CIDCA, specifically China, to act as an intermediary connecting funders and projects within the Project Incubation Pool. This implies that China did not necessarily fund its GDI projects. If the Capital Pool functions as stipulated in the guidelines, China can technically use foreign capital for China-led GDI projects.

### ***Allocating UN Funds for the GDI Projects***

China has funding options for GDI. However, rather than creating a new fund specifically for GDI, China made a financial contribution to an existing United Nations fund—the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF). China initially established the SSCAF at US\$2 billion to support the implementation of the 2030 UN Agenda in September 2015. In May 2017, at the Belt and Road High-Level Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, China pledged an additional US\$1 billion for the Fund.<sup>21</sup>

In June 2022, at the High-level Dialogue on Global Development, Xi Jinping announced that the SSCAF would be integrated into the GDI framework by renaming it with the “Global Development” label. He also pledged an additional US\$1 billion to the fund, bringing its total value to US\$4 billion, to support both the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and GDI.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Xi clarified that China would use the

---

<sup>19</sup> “Global Development Project Pool,” *Global Development Promotion Center of CIDCA*, <https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdpp>, accessed on May 11, 2025. This website does not provide information about the period of the data.

<sup>20</sup> “Global Development Capital Pool,” *Global Development Promotion Center of CIDCA*, <https://en.gdpc.org.cn/specials/gdcp/ggdcp>, accessed on May 13, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> China International Development Cooperation Agency, “Nannan Hezuo Yuanzhu Jijin Jianjie (Introduction to the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund),” August 24, 2018, [http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2018-08/24/c\\_129939202.htm](http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2018-08/24/c_129939202.htm), accessed on June 16, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> China International Development Cooperation Agency, “Quanqiu Fazhan Gaoceng Duihua Hui Zhuxi Shengming (Chairman’s Statement of the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development),” June 25, 2022, [http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2022-06/25/c\\_1211660617.htm](http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2022-06/25/c_1211660617.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

China-UN Peace and Development Fund for GDI.<sup>23</sup> The China-UN Peace and Development Fund was established by China in 2015, with a pledge of US\$1 billion over ten years to support developing countries and promote peace and stability.

Thus, China uses existing UN Funds for the GDI projects along with the abovementioned GIPC Capital Pool. China seeks to “internationalize” the funding mechanism for GDI projects rather than relying on Chinese financial institutions. It marks a clear departure from the approach taken with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in September 2013. China established the Silk Road Fund, a Chinese-owned fund, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), an international financial institution. This difference may be the result of several factors, including China’s limited resources for international development due to its strained economy, as well as its intention to hedge against the risks of accumulating non-performing loans in the long run.

## China’s New Approach to the International Development Order

China’s approach to international development is highly strategic. From the outset, China proposed GDI to accelerate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. Thus, China secured the GDI’s legitimacy and utilized the UN platform. This made it easier for developing countries and other international organizations to participate in GDI.

Second, the GDI principles are universal and lack strong Chinese characteristics. It contrasts with the BRI, namely “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” proposed by Xi Jinping in the fall of 2013, which emphasized China’s identity by using the term “Silk Road” associated with Chinese silk exports in history. In contrast, the six principles of GDI outlined by Xi Jinping in September 2021 appear universal and neutral, far from being unique to China. Specifically, the first principle of “development as a priority” aligns with the foundation underlying all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda. Such efforts make it difficult for developed Western countries to oppose the China-proposed GDI for any reason.

However, in terms of international development aid, beyond the broad principles espoused by the GDI, more specific and well-established international norms, rules, and good practices exist, especially those shared by traditional Western donors who are members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee. While China adheres to general principles in a multilateral setting, it strategically maintains a distinct bilateral aid approach that diverges from traditional donors.<sup>24</sup>

China’s unique aid practices include a lack of transparency in aid information, limited respect for the ownership and partnership principles of developing countries, non-transparent procurement processes dominated by Chinese firms, exclusive provision of goods and services by Chinese entities, and project implementation

---

<sup>23</sup> “Shūshi Kawarazu ni Sekai no Hatten e no Kōken-sha de Arisuzukeru Chūgoku (China Remains a Consistent Contributor to Global Development),” *Jinminmō Nihongo-ban (People’s Daily Online Japanese Edition)*, October 12, 2022. [http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2022-10/12/content\\_78462299.htm](http://japanese.china.org.cn/politics/txt/2022-10/12/content_78462299.htm), accessed on June 18, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Wang Hongying, “Regime Complexity and Complex Foreign Policy: China in International Development Finance Governance,” *Global Policy* 12, Supplement 4 (2021), pp. 75.



through Chinese labor with limited local employment opportunities. Ultimately, China's GDI promotion and bilateral aid practices are fundamentally distinct. China's leadership role in international development does not improve its often-criticized bilateral aid practices.

Third, the content of China's GDI is variable and adaptive. At the outset, the details were not clearly defined. Instead, its key components have gradually become evident in leaders' speeches and official documents. The GDI is not a "static" initiative but a "dynamic" one, capable of evolving in response to international development, China's external environment, and the preferences of its leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The GDI is a part of China's broader strategic approach to international development. Rather than seeking to entirely supplement the existing international order with alternative ideas and principles with Chinese characteristics, China aims to demonstrate leadership by offering a complementary set of ideas and principles and by gaining as much support from other countries as possible. Currently, China is attempting to establish itself as an agenda-setter with its leadership, but this will have a significant impact on the existing international order in the long run.

Now that Donald J. Trump has returned to power and shows little hesitation in undermining the existing liberal international order—an order that previous U.S. administrations worked hard to consolidate and maintain—China may find it easier to reshape elements of the international order in its favor, particularly in areas such as international development. The second Trump administration shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development and created an opening for China to enter the leadership vacuum.

China's perspective on the international order is pluralistic, and its approach is very nuanced. China does not necessarily adopt a holistic approach to its current international order. China challenges its current international order on a sector-by-sector basis. GDI exemplifies one such challenge in international development. Therefore, understanding China's approach to international development through the GDI offers valuable insights into its international strategies in other areas.