



China's Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape: What Relevance for Africa and the Global South?

By Philani Mthembu



Author: Dr Philani Mthembu, Executive Director, Institute for Global Dialogue associated with UNISA

The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

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Introduction

The changing geopolitical landscape has seen a greater movement towards multipolarity as the global balance of power continues to shift, especially in a manner that gives countries of the global South more agency in their immediate regions and beyond. However, unilateral tendencies continue to persist and challenge multilateralism and the ability of countries to meet their commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030. Global governance institutions are thus under extreme pressure as countries that once led their creation openly work against their ability to function. This is the case in the United Nations, where important agencies have been defunded and exited by the United States, making it more difficult for them to fulfil their mandates.

Recent wars have also led to an increase in military expenditure while less resources have been dedicated towards development objectives. These trends have also been accompanied by an unwillingness to resolve conflicts through dialogue and a thorough analysis of their root causes. This has exacerbated the fear of growing fragmentation in global politics, which would have a negative impact on global prosperity, especially in Africa and the global South. Indeed, European countries have dedicated a greater amount of resources towards the war in Ukraine, reducing their overall development cooperation funding towards Africa and the global South, while the United States has completely dismantled USAID and channelled more resources towards military spending in a time when it continues to wage a war on Iran.

With growing uncertainty, countries of the global South have continued to call for the respect of international law with the United Nations (UN) and its Charter at the centre, while simultaneously calling for much needed reforms to take place. Countries in Africa and the global South have also called for more dialogue to address the increasing fragmentation and paralysis of the multilateral system, even drawing on African concepts such as Ubuntu to emphasise the importance of international solidarity and a continued prioritisation of programmes that advance human development.

For its part, China has sought to play a role by introducing the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) in 2023, which calls for cross-cultural dialogue, mutual respect, and people-to-people exchanges. It also called on countries to work towards a community with a shared future for mankind, which is a key feature of the guiding principle of Xi Jinping Thought on diplomacy and foreign policy. China has thus sought to further assert the ideas of win-win cooperation, sustainable and green development, civilisational and cultural exchanges, and common security. These ideas resonate beyond China and have found currency in various parts of the global South. In South Africa, much of the ideas proposed by China find similarities in the values and principles espoused by Ubuntu, which embraces the idea of solidarity and the idea

that 'I am because you are'. Indeed, principles of Ubuntu and ideas embracing a common humanity also resonate across the African continent, building bridges for an exchange of ideas between Africa, China, and the global South. The following article analyses the importance of the Global Civilisation Initiative for China, and its relevance for Africa and the global South.

An Overview of the Global Civilisation Initiative

Partly responding to these major geopolitical changes underway, China has in recent years introduced initiatives that it argues would go a long way towards creating a global environment conducive to development, security, mutual respect amongst countries and towards building societies able to co-exist despite differences between countries. In March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which advocates the respect for the diversity of civilisations.

It was at the 'Communist Party of China (CPC) in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting', where President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address titled 'Join Hands on the Path Towards Modernization', in which he put forward the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). During his address (CIIS, 2026; 7), he then called on all political parties present 'to jointly advocate the respect for the diversity of civilisations, the common values of humanity, the importance of inheritance and innovation of civilisations, and robust international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation, thereby providing a new Chinese proposal for advancing the progress of human civilisation.' Many of the political parties that attended the meeting came from Africa and the global South and expressed their willingness to draw from their own cultures and civilisations to advance a broader dialogue amongst civilisations, especially given the crisis of multilateralism and development challenges faced across the world.

Two years later, on the 10th June 2025, the first United Nations International Day for Dialogue Among Civilisations was held, aimed at bringing countries and people closer at a time when division, misunderstanding, and hostility are too common. The International Day for Dialogue among Civilisations was established by the United Nations General Assembly through resolution A/RES/78/286, adopted on June 7, 2024. The day aims to foster awareness of the value of cultural diversity and promote dialogue as a means to achieve global peace and solidarity. The UN emphasizes that dialogue is essential for overcoming misunderstandings and building trust among nations and peoples. President Xi Jinping (2014) points out that 'a civilisation is the collective memory of a country or a nation.'

Since the GCI was proposed, China has participated more actively in the United Nations General Assembly's discussions on the agenda item of "Culture of Peace", contributing Chinese perspectives to promote dialogue and respect for the diversity of civilisations (CIIS, 2026; 36-37). During the General Debate on the United Nations General Assembly agenda item of "Culture of Peace" in June 2023, China proposed that "we should strengthen inclusiveness and mutual learning among civilisations and promote people-to-people connectivity; support the inclusive coexistence of different cultures, encourage exchanges and mutual learning among different civilisations, welcome closer people-to-people connectivity among countries, and encourage peoples of all countries to join hands in addressing common challenges" (CIIS, 2026; 37).

The Global Civilisation Initiative in a Changing Geopolitical Order: Relevance for Africa and the Global South

The Global Civilisation Initiative is one of four interconnected frameworks proposed by China to promote international cooperation. Together, these initiatives embody the Chinese vision of a "community with a shared future for mankind." The four initiatives are as follows:

- Global Development Initiative (GDI): Introduced in 2021, it aims to accelerate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by focusing on poverty reduction, food security, green development, digital economy, and connectivity.
- Global Security Initiative (GSI): Launched in 2022, it promotes common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. It calls for resolving disputes through dialogue and opposes unilateral sanctions and the use of force.
- Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI): Launched in 2023, calls for cross-cultural dialogue, mutual respect, and people-to-people exchanges.
- Global Governance Initiative (GGI): Proposed during the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus" Meeting in North China's port city of Tianjin in September 2025.

These initiatives were further reiterated by Mr. Han Zheng, Vice President of the People's Republic of China, when he recently addressed the General Debate of the 81st Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. He reiterated that the world wants peace and not war, while stressing the importance of the multilateral system built after the second world war. Importantly, he also emphasised the importance of dialogue for conflict resolution. He further advocated the importance of advancing mutual learning and exchanges amongst different cultures and civilisations in order to build mutual trust while using the United Nations

to build mutual understanding across the world while encouraging greater people to people relations (UNGA 2026).

A recent seminar by the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) and the Chinese Embassy in South Africa interrogated to what extent this vision aligns with the UN Charter, particularly in promoting sovereign equality, non-intervention, peaceful resolution of disputes, and human rights through inclusive development. Locating the dialogue in a context of Africa's place in a changing geopolitical landscape, it sought to understand to what extent the Global Civilisation Initiative aligns with the aspirations of Africa and the global South as they seek to advance the development of their countries and citizens. Indeed, it was clear from discussions held that Africans saw the GCI as an opportunity not only to China, but also for Africans to bring forth their own ideas on global cooperation, drawing from their respective ancient cultures, principles and practices. This would allow for African countries to showcase and popularise important endogenous concepts to the broader international landscape through exchanges, research, and other dialogue processes.

Programs such as Confucius Institutes, Luban Workshops, and youth dialogue platforms demonstrate how engagement is becoming more institutionalised and people-centered (Zhu, Frimpong; 2026), and allows for a two-way exchange between Africa, China, and the global South. Cole Jackson states that the GCI addresses an important concern in terms of 'a growing tendency to frame international relations through ideological and cultural confrontation. China's proposition is that civilisations should engage through equality, dialogue, inclusiveness and mutual learning rather than through claims of cultural or political superiority.' This proposed approach has resonated widely given the context of an increasingly multipolar order. Indeed, multipolarity will mean a greater diversity of political systems, cultures and development models having to coexist instead of clashing.

Utilising mechanisms and initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, "Year of Culture" programs, and "Experience China" programs, the Chinese state has been able to expand people to people relations (CIIS, 2026; 4). China has also initiated the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, which fosters exchanges and mutual learning in Asia and beyond, while it has also advocated that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) be seen as a vehicle for enhanced relations among civilisations (CIIS, 2026; 11).

China, alongside fellow BRICS partners has also supported the building of people-to-people and cultural exchanges amongst BRICS members. Indeed, this has seen the active participation of young people through Summer School programmes, civil society, the business community, and think tanks as they enhance collaboration and the promotion of mutual understanding amongst the countries and peoples within BRICS. Concepts such as Ubuntu

will also likely find greater adoption and resonance where people to people and cultural exchanges are held with the intention to foster greater tolerance. While geopolitical fractures continue to have a negative impact on the livelihoods of people across the world, African countries, China, and the broader global South would likely play a greater role and exercise more agency as the balance of power continues to shift, opening more room for initiatives resonating with the GCI and ideas embedded in the principle of Ubuntu.

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