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China's new global governance institutions

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  In the first three decades of the twenty-first century, China has established regional groupings to steer its relations with partner nations, especially in the global South.
-  The Chinese government supports its regionalisation efforts with a number of forums, conferences, and other events intended to promote China's influence.
-  Chinese-led regional cooperation platforms have generated a degree of support for Beijing's attempts to gain acceptance of Chinese norms in the areas of human rights, security, and governance.
-  The collective impact of conferences and meetings is significant in shifting discourses beyond China's own borders and chipping away at some of the normative foundations of the Western-led liberal international order (LIO).
-  The West, including of course the EU, needs to present a viable alternative to China by presenting an effective counter-offer based on mutual respect and what countries and regions think they need rather than what the EU thinks they need.

Keywords

Human
Rights

Liberal
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Global
Governance

Regional
Cooperation

Global
Development
Initiative



Introduction

In the Xi Jinping era, China is emerging as a self-declared leader in the search for global governance reform. Through its Belt and Road Initiative ([BRI](#)), its membership of [BRICS](#), and its launch of new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank ([AIIB](#)), Beijing is challenging the Western-led liberal international order ([LIO](#)) represented by the [G7](#) and other international institutions.

China's attempt to alter the global governance architecture has massive implications. But the world will not simply be changed by China alone. For Chinese ideas, preferences and initiatives to have global salience, then they need to be accepted and supported (and maybe promoted) by others too; and there needs to be a significant amount of those others if Chinese initiatives such as the BRI are to lead to a fundamental shift in ordering and governance.

Many aspects of the means by which China is expanding its influence have been studied. For instance, expanding China's international economic interactions through trade and investments is one way of engaging others and potentially gaining their acceptance of Chinese positions. By harnessing the hard power of money, the Xi administration attempts to promote an idea of China as a new type of global actor that is fundamentally different from other great powers. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants China to be perceived as a [global power](#) that will not repeat the errors and sins of imperialist colonisers in the past. It also seeks to oppose those who ([it claims](#)) seek to dominate, bully and exploit developing economies today. This fundamental difference, so the argument goes, will be manifest both in China's bilateral relations, and also in its initiatives and innovations at the global level too. Examples of novel [Chinese structures](#) with global implications include the [Global Development](#), [Global Security](#), and [Global Civilization](#) Initiatives, Chinese preferences for global

[cyber governance](#) (or the lack of it), and the internationalisation of Chinese definitions and understandings of [human rights](#).

Somewhat less studied are the now quite extensive range of other platforms that China has established or co-established to provide mechanisms for talking to the rest of the world. Chinese initiatives include a range of more or less formal intergovernmental type structures built to facilitate interactions with groups of potential followers in different parts of the world, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization ([SCO](#)) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation ([FOCAC](#)). There are also a number of China-centred international meetings and forums often (but not always) built around specific issue areas.

Of course, China is not alone in establishing or joining such mechanisms. And what China is doing is not new either; China's leaders have been trying to find effective ways of getting their message across to international audiences since [before they came to power](#) in 1949. Indeed, a number of the groupings and meetings discussed in this paper pre-date Xi Jinping's rise to power. But as with most things related to the politics and international relations of contemporary China, things have become somewhat supercharged since Xi became General Secretary in 2012. There is also evidence that these attempts to encourage buy-in and support have had some success too. Whether the West likes it or not, China's regional and other cooperation mechanisms are impacting the norms through which nations engage with each other by offering alternative arrangements to the customary global institutions.

Regional Based Groupings

Regional groupings serve a range of different purposes. Most obviously they provide mechanisms for high-level diplomatic interaction during which China's leaders can explain their goals and initiatives, and showcase their capacity to push for change. For example, [FOCAC](#) summits and meetings have been used to not just announce new financial projects, but also to re-iterate China's preferred national image as a new and different type of (non-Western) great power, and to rebuff criticism of China. For example, Foreign Minister Wang Yi used the [2019 FOCAC meeting](#) to reject accusations that China was deploying debt trap diplomacy and acting as a neo-colonial power in its relations with the continent.

They also show (or at least are meant to show) that China is not alone in being dissatisfied by the distribution of power in current institutions of global governance, some of the norms and principles that underpin them, and the more general dominance of the West/liberal/US power and preferences in the international system. Individually, they reflect (to varying extents) international acknowledgement of China's global status and global governance reform ambitions. Just the fact that they exist is significant in itself. And this is multiplied by their combined aggregate significance.

The way they operate is also meant to show this different type of great power in action. Although there appear to be very clear power asymmetries in all of them, they are explained as not about China imposing its will and authority on others, but instead being built on [*mutual respect and mutual learning*](#).

While the two-way flow of ideas and influence and the mutuality of any gains might be questioned, there is some evidence to show that China's regionalisation efforts have had some impact on its partners. At the 2012 FOCAC Summit in Johannesburg, South African President [*Jacob Zuma*](#) explicitly pointed to the different Chinese approach compared to Africa's dealings with Western states:

We are particularly pleased that in our relationship with China we are equals and that agreements entered into are for mutual gain. This gathering indicates commitment to mutual respect and benefit. We certainly are convinced that China's intention is different to that of Europe.

In general China does not engage in criticism of other developing states' domestic policies – most notably in terms of human rights and the nature of illiberal political regimes - or of other states' political leaders. This is not to say that criticism is always totally absent (particularly if issues relating to Chinese core interests like Taiwan are involved). But these political issues are not what China's summit meetings with regional groupings are all about.

FOCAC is the most studied of all the regional groupings. It is one of the longest existing, originating with ministerial level meetings in 2000 before the addition of a heads of state [*summit in 2006*](#). It has a formalised and institutionalised working structure as well, with three-year action plans agreed at each summit with regular follow up meetings to check on implementation. It has also generated a number of [*functional sub-groupings*](#) too; "the China-Africa People's Forum, China-Africa Young Leaders Forum, Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Health Cooperation, Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, China-Africa Poverty Reduction and Development Conference, FOCAC-Legal Forum, Forum on China".

In a very similar vein, the [*China-Arab States Cooperation Forum*](#) was established in 2004 with the Arab League and its members, and the [*China-CELAC Forum*](#) with 33 Latin American and Caribbean ([*LAC*](#)) States in 2014. Like the FOCAC, these have spawned a range of different functional and specific bilateral mechanisms too. The former organises four seminars (on entrepreneurs, economics and trade, "civilizations dialogue", and Higher Education and Scientific Cooperation), an energy conference, two exchanges (cultural, and non-governmental) a news cooperation forum, and training (environmental and human resources). The latter has forums on agriculture, science and technology, business, infrastructure; for collaboration between political parties, think tanks, and young leaders; and to promote "[*people-to-people*](#)" friendship. Interactions with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) have not reached the same level, even though China provides some funding for the Forum

through the China-PIF Cooperation Fund and participates in multilateral functional level ministerial meetings (for example, on Agriculture and Fisheries). A China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Leaders Forum was established in 2006 and to date there have been two bilateral foreign minister meetings in 2021 and 2022. At the second of these, Wang Yi “announced that China will continue to build six new cooperation platforms, including poverty reduction, climate change, disaster prevention, agriculture and Juncao centers” (Juncao is a patented Chinese grass species that is particularly good at growing grass and/or mushrooms in difficult environments which has been championed by Xi Jinping).

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China’s formalised interactions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) via annual [ASEAN Plus China Summits](#) since 1997 also serves some of the functions outlined above. Here, though, there is also an element of [confidence building](#) too, as China seeks to “reassure Asean states that China’s rise doesn’t threaten their economic and security interests” by emphasising cooperation and collaboration and the positive contributions China’s rise can make to regional prosperity and peace.

Some of what China does in and with the [BRICS](#) shares some of these traits, as do China’s role and actions in the [SCO](#). Certainly, both are non-Western organizations whose members share a broad position on the nature of the global order – a sort of alliance of the dissatisfied – even if they don’t always agree on what a future alternative could or should look like.

China has now also established another separate mechanism for interacting with some of the SCO countries. In 2023, meetings with the C-5 group of Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) were elevated from foreign ministry level to a heads of state summit, hosted by Xi Jinping in XI’an. China is far from alone in engaging the C-5 in this way. Indeed, China was perhaps a little behind the curve given the institution of C-5 countries ministerial level meetings with the US back in 2015. The EU held its first similar summit in Kazakhstan in 2022. Even so, the establishment of a relationship without Russian or Indian participation is not insignificant, and resulted in

a formal declaration of the C-5 countries [support and promotion](#) of XI's Global Development, Global Security, and Global Civilization initiatives.

In Europe, in 2012 Beijing set up a similar regional grouping in the form of the so-called '[16+1](#)' platform for cooperation with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. [Greece](#) was added in 2019, making the grouping '17+1'. In the early years, things went smoothly and the CEE nations welcomed the increased Chinese presence, even if the EU was suspicious of what it saw as an attempt to [divide and conquer](#). However, when investments tended to come in a dribble rather than a flood, enthusiasm waned. The issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan and China's human rights record in Xinjiang came to the fore. [In 2022](#), the Baltic states, led by Lithuania's turn to Taiwan, withdrew from the mechanism, while the Czech Republic wavered. By 2023, the now 14+1 had effectively become a [zombie mechanism](#) with [few real results](#) apart from increased bilateral cooperation with political outliers, most notably Hungary and Serbia.

Nevertheless, one can take the apparent failure of 16/17/14+1 to be an exception to the general trend of China increasing its influence across the (mostly developing) world via regional groupings. Their relative success is due to the use of a range of events and other mechanisms intended to provide regionalised support to China's bilateral ties with individual states.

Promoting China

China's regional groupings are complemented by a wide range of conferences, forums and other forms of "international exchange" that are designed to bring (usually sympathetic) international audiences to China and explain Chinese policies and ambitions to them. These are not intergovernmental events as such, designed to bring together a range of different actors (particularly in the issue-based organisations). That said, the hand of the Chinese state or the party is never very far away from the Chinese organizing bodies, and foreign leaders and officials do often participate. Foreign ex-leaders are particularly prominent in some of them.

Indeed, probably the most famous of these forums, [the Bo'ao Forum for Asia](#), in some ways straddles the boundary between the two types of institution covered in this paper. Although the forums are always hosted in Bo'ao on Hainan Island with a secretariat in Beijing, it came into existence in 2001 – seven years before it held its first conference – as a result of a broader regional consensus that Asia needed its own equivalent of the Davos Forum. Despite the pan-regional participation, Chinese leaders have often given keynote presentations, and used the annual conference to make major new announcements. It was at Bo'ao, for example, in 2022 that Xi Jinping launched his [Global Security Initiative](#). And his choice of this venue might have been influenced by the fact that it was also at Bo'ao in 2003 that the idea of China's Peaceful Rise was launched in an attempt to convince the world that

they had nothing to worry about.

The peaceful rise argument became the key foreign policy concept (or slogan) of the Hu Jintao era, and was introduced at Bo'ao by Zheng Bijian. Zheng later became the founding Chair of the [China Institute for Innovation and Development Strategy](#), which is part of the [Chinese Academy of Sciences](#), which in turn sits under the State Council (China's governmental cabinet organisation). It organizes what is now the annual "[Understanding China Conference](#)", which are "scheduled to take place following the conclusion of the CPC National Congress or the yearly plenum of the CPC Central Committee to get across the guiding principles of these important CPC conventions and the Party's statecraft at home and beyond".

In a similar vein, [The China Development Forum](#) is normally scheduled to coincide with the key annual government (rather than party) meeting; the plenary session of the National People's Congress in March. It is specifically designed to facilitate interaction with leading global business leaders. And as its [delegate list](#) from the 2023 forum shows, it has been very successful in attracting top executives from top companies to attend. As this is organized by the Development Research Center of the State Council, it once more is not an intergovernmental event, but neither is it a non-governmental one (on the Chinese side at least).

There are others too. They include a number of think tanks, such as the [China Global Think Tank Innovation Forum](#), the China Development Institution's [China Think Tank Forum](#), and the International Think Tank Forum co-led by the Counsellors' Office of the State Council, the China Public Diplomacy Association, and the China Council for International Investment Promotion. There are also a range of specific regional think tank forums that mirror the regional groupings noted above (for China and CELAC, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa, and East and Central Europe). Think Tanks have been particularly important in promoting a [preferred understanding](#) of what the BRI is meant to be about. In addition to the special [thematic forum](#) on Think Tanks as part of the bigger Belt and Road Forum, there is a Silk Road Think Tank Network and a Silk Road Think Tanks Association. Collectively, this focus on think tanks perhaps says something about the importance of trying to get others to not just share Chinese perspectives, but to disseminate them as well.

From Promotion to Endorsement

Regional groupings are designed to project a preferred idea of China and dispel what Beijing argues are deliberate distortions of China's intentions. The next step is to get active support for China's global ambitions and preferences. This drive to gain endorsement for the Chinese approach to international affairs has already had a degree of success in some areas.

The annual [World Internet Conference](#), also known as the Wuzhen Internet Summit, is a good example. The first summit in November 2014 was one of the first clear(ish) statements

of China's intent to play a leading role in global governance reform. In a very short [opening message](#) of congratulations, Xi repeated and essentially internationalised the basic outline of China's approach from its 2010 White Paper on [The Internet in China](#):

Following the principle of mutual respect and mutual trust, China is ready to work with other countries to deepen international cooperation, respect sovereignty on the Internet, uphold cyber security, and jointly build a cyberspace of peace, security, openness and cooperation and an International Internet governance system of multilateralism, democracy and transparency.

We should note that democracy here means equality between nations rather than the electoral system used in liberal polities. In the Chinese usage, democracy represents an ideological counter-offensive to what is seen as the dictating of terms by powerful nations in the North. An important aspect of this is what has become known as cyber-sovereignty: the idea that states should be able to govern their national cyberspace as they see fit, unhindered by any higher or external level of authority. While there is more to China's internet conference than just a focus on cyber-security, and more to the promotion of Chinese normative preferences than just the summit alone, cyber-sovereignty is a position that resonates with the political priorities of [other national leaders](#) too.

Something similar is occurring in the fields of human rights and global governance. The South-South Human Rights Forum was established in 2017 by the Chinese State Council Information Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a [video](#) explaining its functions explains, it has a mission to provide a collective voice for developing countries, to endorse a developmental centred approach to human rights in developing countries, and to promote the recognition of cultural and national diversity when it comes to global human rights governance. Despite its Chinese government origins, it is not a formal inter-governmental organization. But its status is even further blurred as its [non-Chinese participants](#) include a number of government officials (mainly from foreign ministries), political advisors, and diplomats (as well as a range of different non-governmental researchers). The documents that it produces, then, do not constitute formal and binding positions on the governments of the participants. But it is nevertheless fair to assume that it reflects at least some of these governments' positions.

One of the key documents produced at the first forum in 2017 is the [Beijing Declaration](#), which endorses and adopts the key tenets of Chinese definitions and understandings of Human Rights. Article one, for example, establishes the national relativity principle:

the realization of human rights must take into account regional and national contexts, and political, economic, social, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds. The cause of human rights must and can only be advanced in accordance with the national conditions and the needs of the peoples.

Article three reaffirms the priority of socio-economic and developmental rights over others:

The right to subsistence and the right to development are the primary basic human rights.... Developing countries should pay special attention to safeguarding the people's right to subsistence and right to development, especially to achieve a decent standard of living, adequate food, clothing, and clean drinking water, the right to housing, the right to security, work, education, and the right to health and social security.

The ultimate goal is to go beyond shared language amongst like-minded leaders and states, and to shift the dialogue at the global level too. To this end, the various meetings and groupings discussed in this paper can be thought of as providing interim stepping stones towards a bigger global audience and agenda. In addition to building a critical mass of supporters – very useful when China itself is facing criticism – as [Fung and Lam](#) note, “Beijing also seeks to project discourse power by having officials from other member states or the United Nations repeat China’s policy narratives”.

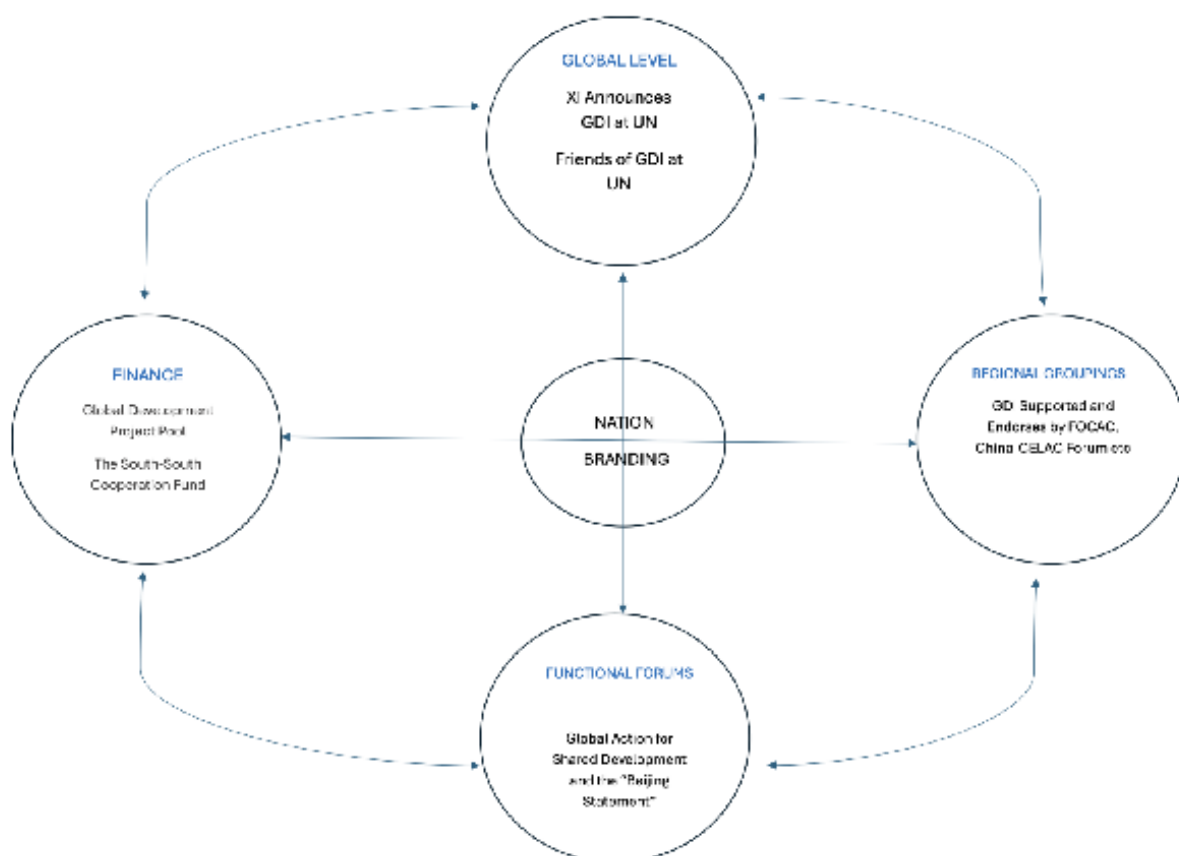
The consequences of Chinese influence-building

The above observations point to two key takeaways. First, each of these individual forums, conferences and so on might not be that important in themselves. To be sure, some have a bigger impact than others. But overall, it is the collective impact of all of these endeavours added together that is most significant in shifting discourses beyond China’s own borders and chipping away at some of the normative foundations of the liberal global order.

Second, we need to think about how different elements of Chinese global initiatives work together to reinforce and support each other. These include: the announcement of grand plans, the establishment of special forums and conferences, work with regional groupings, the provision of financial support, and discussions among global South actors at the UN.

The promotion of a specific understanding of the nature of development provides the best example of how these different elements work together. [The Global Development Initiative](#), announced by Xi (via video link) at the UN in 2021 provides the big picture grand vision and ambition. This is then endorsed with promises to promote it in regional grouping forums; for example, at the C+C-5 (already noted above), [at FOCAC](#), at the [China-CELAC Forum](#), and so on. At the global level, Xi used a virtual High Level Dialogue on Global Development in June 2022 to announce and upgrading of funding for South-South development projects. Three months later, a new [Group of Friends of the GDI](#) was established at the UN which was attended by high-level representatives of 60 countries ... as well as principals of about ten international organizations and UN entities, and Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Africa. UN Secretary-General António Guterres delivered a video message and Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed attended the meeting.

A new meeting mechanism was then established in the form of the [Global Action for Shared Development](#) by the state China International Development Cooperation Agency ([CIDCA](#)) which held its first forum in July 2023. This forum produced an agreed final [Beijing Statement](#) which praised and endorsed the GDI, and called for “the integrated implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the GDI”. The statement also noted the coordinating role for the forum’s work of the [Global Development Promotion Center](#) also under the CIDCA, which oversees the disbursement of money via the Global Development Project Pool and the South-South Cooperation Fund. The first batch of [development pool funding](#) had already been released in August 2022, and while the implementing agencies were primarily the CIDCA itself and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, this was often in partnership with UN agencies, and even included projects solely implemented by non-Chinese agencies (such as [The Asia-Pacific Network for Sustainable Forest Management](#)).



Grand plans, regional groupings, functional forums, agreed statements, UN level activity and – maybe most important of all – money are used collectively as part of a process of [nation branding](#); establishing the CCPs preferred idea of what China is and what it stands for. They have also have come together to establish the GDI as a project that has significant international support and buy-in. To be sure, it might be an initiative that does not revolutionise the nature of the global order. Indeed, China’s leaders are very keen to emphasise its compatibility with the pre-existing UN [Strategic Development Goals](#), and pitch the GDI as a

means to attaining these goals. It is an initiative that has the potential to do a lot of good. But it is not value free, and is built on a certain understanding of what development should be about; or more correctly, what it need not or should not be about (ie: Sen's understanding of *Development as Freedom*).

Conclusion: Leadership and Followership

Understanding that Chinese influence attempts have achieved some degree of impact and success suggests that there is an international market for what China is selling. Dissatisfaction with the existing global order is not just limited to China; or just to a small handful of states and state elites. To varying degrees, there is dissatisfaction with various parts and elements of the status quo ante in many parts of the world (including within the liberal West itself).

A shared dissatisfaction, though, does not automatically equate to an unquestioning acceptance of Chinese alternatives across all of these different parts and elements. There is a need for a nuanced and variegated study of who simply shares Chinese dissatisfaction, and who is prepared to support Chinese alternatives in which issue areas. In addition to studying potential alternatives and potential new leaders, then, it is important to also undertake a comprehensive audit of what Cooper, Higgott and Nossal way back in 1991 called “the *dynamics of followership* – in other words, **what drives followers to follow** [emphasis added]”.

Accepting this truth implies that there is a need to examine further – in a systematic, co-ordinated manner, and with appropriate institutional support and public dissemination – exactly what China is doing to attract other countries to its camp. It is also necessary to admit that part of China's attraction is based on negative views of the West. Swallowing this bitter pill means re-evaluating the assumption that everybody thinks the EU is a moral force or a *normative power*. Instead, it is advisable to adopt a revised approach to both China and its partners, present and potential, which learns lessons from China's rising influence. It is essential, for the future of the Liberal International Order and the EU's position in the world, to provide a viable alternative to China. This can be done, but only by presenting an effective counter-offer based on an appropriate respect for what countries think they need rather than what the EU thinks they need.



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