

The Global Governance Initiative: China's 2025 Proposal for Reforming Multilateralism

Augustine Erameh

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy

Baze University, Abuja-Nigeria

Abstract

The Global Governance Initiative GGI was introduced by President Xi Jinping on 1st September 2025 at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO Plus Summit in Tianjin. The GGI is the fourth of Xi's "Global Initiatives" (GDI, GSI, GGI) and a normative and procedural plan for reforming international institutions. This paper examines the origins of the GGI, its five principles, institutional implications, and initial diplomatic success. It suggests that the GGI aims to maintain the UN-based system and to rebalance representation and legitimacy to the Global South. The key challenge for the initiative will be to translate its general principles into specific institutional change.

Keywords: Global Governance, Multilateralism, Xi Jinping, SCO, United Nations, China Foreign Policy

1. Introduction

The global system as it exists today is in a state of dramatic change: marked by geopolitical competition, economic fragmentation, technological disruption, climate change and a lack of satisfaction with current multilateral institutions. The international order established after 1945 has been a source of stability and development in the world, but some have questioned its effectiveness, inclusiveness and legitimacy. The view of the majority of developing countries is that the international institutions, like the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, are less reflective of the present world's realities, especially the rise of emerging economies and the Global South (Ahmad, 2024). As a result of this, the issue of global governance reform has been at the heart of the current international relations scholarship and policy-making.

In this context, China has been making efforts to become a major proponent of reforming the global governance system. In the past few years, China has launched several international efforts to redefine international cooperation and reinforce multilateralism under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. They are the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). In September 2025, China presented the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), which is a comprehensive proposal to tackle the perceived weakness in the existing global governance mechanism and to build a more representative and inclusive international order.

The GGI is coming at a moment when citizens' trust in established systems of government is being tested like never before. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the limitations in global health governance, and geopolitical tensions between key players have made it more difficult to tackle climate change, cybersecurity, migration and economic instability. In You's view (2024), China's recent governance efforts are a comprehensive effort to offer new solutions to global challenges

through co-operation, dialogue and common development instead of unilateralism and confrontation.

The project also aligns with China's vision of creating a "community with a shared future for mankind," which underscores the principles of mutual respect, common development, and shared responsibility in solving global issues. Duarte, Gupta, and Delvaje (2024) contend that China's growing diplomatic assertiveness is an indication of its efforts to shift from being a player in global governance to one of its key agenda setters. The GGI aims to facilitate reforms to improve the role of developing countries in the United Nations without diminishing the importance of UN coordination of international affairs. This paper investigates the origins, context, principles and institutional aspects of the Global Governance Initiative. It believes that the GGI is the most comprehensive initiative that China has introduced so far to shape the future direction of multilateralism by advancing governance reform to make multilateralism more inclusive, more cooperative, and more representative of the Global South in international institutions.

2. context of the Global Governance Initiative

The rise of the Global Governance Initiative is closely related to the changing distribution of power on the world stage. In the last 20 years, China has seen amazing growth and become more influential in the world. China has increasingly engaged in the development of international institutions and governance, as it has become more present on the international stage. Yuan (2025) argues that China has shifted from being passive and accepting of the current governance system to playing an active role in discussions of institutional reform and global leadership. The dissatisfaction of many developing countries with the structure and operation of the existing international institutions is one of the main reasons behind the GGI. While institutions like the IMF, World Bank and UN are still key players in global governance, there is a perception that power is still heavily skewed toward the West. Many of the emerging economies are increasingly turning to governance arrangements to more closely align with the modern economic realities and demographic trends (Ahmad 2024).

China has not been opposing the multilateral institutions, but rather calling for their reform. This trend is seen in China's backing for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), BRICS cooperation mechanisms, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), etc. The institutions are complementary, not an alternative to existing governance systems and also provide additional opportunities for the developing countries to be involved in international decision-making processes.

Another source of the GGI is the alleged inadequacies of current global governance institutions. The international cooperation is weak and has been highlighted by recent crises. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a more robust system of global health coordination and the challenges of implementation in climate change negotiations. Likewise, growing geopolitical tensions have played a negative role in collective action on transnational issues like cybercrime, terrorism, food security and energy insecurity. Stephen (2025) argues that these governance deficits have led to China's efforts to foster new governance models based on concrete cooperation and institutional adjustment. Another important factor influencing the development of the GGI is the growing prominence of the Global South. There has been a growing call in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East for more involvement in international governance processes. China's governance discourse is always about giving voice to developing countries and addressing inequity in international institutions. In his article (2024), You argues that the three major initiatives of

China are all aimed at the creation of a governance model that emphasizes inclusiveness, development and equitable participation.

Moreover, the growing diplomatic engagement of China is a sign of its desire to take on more responsibility in the international system. In the face of rising geopolitical tensions and uncertainty about the future of international cooperation, China is increasingly presenting itself as a champion of multilateralism, as noted by Duarte, Gupta, and Delvaje (2024). China is trying to portray itself as a positive player that offers solutions to current governance issues via the GGI. Hence, the Global Governance Initiative should be interpreted as a reaction to the transformations in the international system and as a result of the changing trajectory of China's foreign policy. It is a move to reform governance institutions in a manner that increases their legitimacy, effectiveness and representation, and maintains international stability and cooperation.

3. Principles and Institutional Implications of the Global Governance Initiative

The Global Governance Initiative is based on several interrelated principles that together constitute China's vision for the future of international cooperation. These principles are both normatively guiding and practically suggesting reforms of global governance institutions.

The first principle is that of multilateralism. China has always said that the world's problems must be addressed together and that multilateral institutions are irreplaceable in ensuring world peace and development. Multilateralism includes consultation, cooperation and shared responsibility among the states as opposed to unilateralism. China's governance efforts are clearly meant to strengthen multilateral mechanisms, not weaken them, states Duarte, Gupta, and Delvaje (2024).

The second one is respect for sovereignty and non-interference. China believes that all countries, irrespective of their size, economic power or political system, should have equal rights in the international system. This focus is in accord with Chinese foreign policy tradition and in line with many developing countries which are highly sensitive to outside interference. However, sovereignty is still a key element in China's vision of the reform of global governance, according to Ahmad (2024).

The third principle is more representation for the less developed countries. China believes that governance institutions should be more representative of the realities of today, with a greater voice and influence for emerging economies and the Global South. It is especially important when discussing proposals for reform of the UN Security Council, the voting power of the IMF and international financial governance. According to Yuan (2025), the Chinese governance approach aims to achieve a more equitable spread of institutional power without undermining existing institutions.

The fourth principle of the initiative is development. China's governance philosophy is based on the concept of sustainable development, which is key to ensuring long-term peace and stability. In this regard, poverty alleviation, infrastructure building, technology cooperation and economic integration are at the heart of the GGI. You (2024) states that development is the basis for China's larger governance programs.

The fifth principle is dialogue, consultation and consensus building. China believes that international conflicts should be settled through negotiations, not coercion or confrontation. This

is an effort to encourage cooperation between the states that have different political systems, cultures and levels of development. As Song and Wang (2024) point out, the Chinese proposals to governance are always based on consultation and cooperative security arrangements, rather than competitive geopolitical strategies.

The implications of the GGI for institutions are potentially significant. First, the initiative may be a part of the current debate about changes in the big international organizations. More representation for the developing countries can bring more legitimacy and efficiency in global governance institutions. Second, the GGI can reinforce South-South cooperation through fostering cooperation between developing countries, for example in the field of trade and infrastructure, technology and sustainable development.

The initiative might foster more cooperation in governance in new issue domains, such as artificial intelligence, digital governance, environmental sustainability, maritime governance, and global health. Xu et al (2024) believe that China's governance vision has increasingly been infused with new transnational challenges that demand innovative institutional solutions.

It comes with a number of challenges, however, due to these opportunities. There are doubts about how consensus can be reached among the big powers on institutional reforms. Others are worried about the implications of China's increasing influence in international institutions. Yet the GGI is a substantial contribution to current discussions on global governance reform, and reflects China's desire to have a prominent place in the future of multilateral cooperation.

The potential effectiveness of the Global Governance Initiative will rely on its capacity to turn high-level principles into concrete institutional changes that can be effective in solving the intricate problems besetting the international community in the twenty-first century.

4. Impact of the Global Governance Initiative on Developing Nations

The effects of the GGI are gradually becoming more noticeable in developing nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The initiative's focus on development, infrastructure investment, poverty alleviation, and technology transfer offers an alternative forum for the participation of countries in the decision-making process on a global level (Wang & French, 2024; You, 2024). The GGI is seen by many developing countries as a chance to make their voices heard in international affairs and to gain more equitable representation in international institutions, especially in the wake of the long-standing concerns over the lack of representation in the current global governance structure (Zeng & Breslin, 2024; Stuenkel, 2024).

Moreover, it fosters a spirit of cooperation and problem-solving, rather than confrontation and unilateralism, (Callahan, 2023; Foot, 2023). This has led to a greater sense of cooperation between South-South countries, and an increased collaboration between emerging economies on various topics, including climate change, sustainable development, public health and economic governance (Cooper & Farooq, 2025; Wang & French, 2024). Consequently, the GGI is slowly gaining a foothold in international discussions of governance reform and is increasingly making a difference in the world of global multilateral cooperation (Shambaugh, 2024; Ikenberry, 2024).

5. International Reception and Challenges of the Global Governance Initiative

Since its launch, the Global Governance Initiative has gained significant traction among governments, scholars and international organizations alike. The reception has been different in different regions, as they have different understandings of China's rising influence over global governance and international affairs.

The initiative has garnered many positive responses from developing countries, as they have raised concerns on this issue for a long time in international institutions. African, Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern nations have been pressing for reforms that would better enable them to play a role in the decision-making processes of the world. The GGI's focus on inclusiveness, development and sovereign equality is therefore very relevant to these states. The rise of the Global South has provided a conducive environment for governance efforts aimed at democratizing international institutions and addressing longstanding inequalities in governance. The Global South has become increasingly prominent, and this has created a favorable governance environment for democratic reforms of international institutions and a reduction in long-standing inequalities in governance.

The initiative has also been discussed in the emerging multilateral organizations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Such institutions are becoming more common in conducting governance reforms and enhancing cooperation among developing countries, with the Chinese government increasingly using them to do so. As the BRICS bloc continues to grow, it has been observed by Cooper and Farooq (2025) that the world is increasingly becoming multipolar and representative, offering opportunities for initiatives like the GGI to attract diplomatic backing.

But there have been more reserved responses from the West. Some analysts and policy makers see it as a serious effort to governance reform, while others wonder whether it's more about China's interests. Questions have been raised about the potential impact of China's current influence in international organizations and whether governance reforms would impact current norms concerning democracy, human rights, and liberal internationalism (Shambaugh, 2024).

One of the biggest challenges facing the project is implementation. The GGI states general principles, but it is not easy to translate these principles into concrete institutional reforms. Major shifts in organizations like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are extensive negotiations and consensus among member states. It is not uncommon for reform initiatives to face opposition from vested interests who wish to maintain current institutional structures (Ikenberry 2024).

Yet another hurdle has to do with the growing geopolitical rivalry between great powers. The rivalry between China and the United States is now shaping the international discourse on governance, technology, trade and security in a strategic way. The competition can make it hard to forge consensus on governance reforms linked to China. Many nations may want to stay neutral in terms of aligning themselves with either of the two powers and have strategic flexibility.

The GGI has come a long way, and although it has faced its share of difficulties, it has been a major force in today's debate on the future of global governance. It exposes the increasing calls for institutional changes and wider changes in the global distribution of power. The success of the initiative will rely on achieving wide international consensus, finding a way to tackle the practical governance issues and ensuring that the principles can be realized in practical institutional results.

But its rise is a testament to China's growing resolve to determine the course of global governance and multilateral cooperation in the twenty-first century.

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