
CHINA POWER | DIPLOMACY | EAST ASIA

The Trouble With China's Global Civilization Initiative

The GCI is an attempt to win global buy-in for China's principle of non-interference by conflating modern-day regimes with traditional culture.

By **R. Evan Ellis**

June 01, 2023



Credit: [Depositphotos](#)

History is marked by the recurring tragedy of publics rallying around leaders with attractive-sounding rhetoric, from new constitutions to government-led development and social justice, to prosperity through privatization. Whether on the right or the left, the most consistent outcome is to empower and benefit the elites selling the concept.

China's new Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), announced by Xi Jinping in his March 15 keynote speech to the [Chinese Communist Party High-Level Dialogue with World Political Parties](#), fits neatly into the global tradition of leaders selling attractive-sounding concepts whose practical implications ultimately benefit them.

China's GCI sits alongside the previously announced [Global Development Initiative](#) (GDI) and [Global Security Initiative](#) (GSI) as a [triumvirate](#) of complementary, if amorphous, concepts in the "[Community of Common Destiny](#)," which Xi and the Chinese Communist Party are advancing as Beijing's alternative to the Western-dominated "[rules-based international order](#)."

The appeal of the GCI is enabled by its ambiguity. Xi's address presenting it spoke of "common aspirations" (not rights) of humanity of "[peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom.](#)" At the same time, the GCI advocates against a world in which those concepts can have meaning through united efforts to call out and collectively act against those who violate them. Under the GCI, perceptions of such "common aspirations" are "relative" and thus countries must "[refrain from imposing their own values or models on others.](#)"

As a rhetorical tool, such language arguably plays to resentment in many parts of the world that the West has often been overbearing in promoting its concept of democracy and universal human rights, as well as its economic models and belief systems.

[Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

Despite such reasonable-sounding language, the GCI's most insidious effect is that it is fundamentally a self-serving effort to disarm the "rules based international order." By promoting the relativism of values and arguing against calling out bad behavior and seeking to stop it, the concept appeals to regimes that desire to do what they wish, from criminality and repression at home to the [ruthless invasion of their neighbors](#) under the spurious mantle of "[legitimate security concerns.](#)"

The GCI is rooted in a convenient "forgetting" of the origins of international law and institutions of global governance (however imperfect). The post-World War II order is rooted in the recognition that state sovereignty, while an important principle, is not the only principle. A world in which those who are able to

appropriate control of physical territory can impose their will on their subjects and neighbors without external interference is not an adequate basis for global security.

Chinese authors approvingly discussing Xi's GCI speech have invoked the names of philosophers such as [Confucius and Socrates](#). The more appropriate reference is arguably [Thomas Hobbes](#), who observed that, in the absence of governance, the strong take what they will from the weaker.

Xi proclaimed in his GCI speech that China would avoid the "[crooked path taken by some countries to seek hegemony once they grow strong](#)." The statement must have seemed ironic to many of China's neighbors, particularly those whose waters have been encroached by China's "[nine-dash line](#)" maritime claim in the South China Sea. That claim was found to be in contravention of the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#), yet Beijing still pursues it through the [militarization of reefs and shoals](#), reinforced by the activities of the [China Coast Guard](#) and [Maritime Militia](#).

Xi's statement that the Chinese "[firmly oppose hegemony and power politics in all their forms](#)" might also seem ironic to Taiwan, which suffers regular large-scale displays of [military force](#) aimed to intimidate them; Canada, which saw China detain two of its citizens in an attempt to [coerce Ottawa into rejecting a U.S. extradition request](#) for wanted Chinese executive Meng Wanzhou; or Australia, against whom China's government [imposed heavy economic sanctions](#) after Canberra called for an investigation of the origins of COVID-19.

In addition to China's external behavior, Xi's CGI imperative that "[countries need to uphold the](#)

principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness among civilizations” is apparently not intended to apply within a country’s borders. China does not seem to acknowledge a duty to respect the civilization of more than 1 million Uyghur Muslims who have been interned in re-education and forced work camps in a concerted effort to eliminate their culture. Similarly, the CCP’s attempts at absolute control of the internet and public discourse within Chinese territory highlight that the GCI’s advocacy of a dialogue “between civilizations” is not intended to extend to diversity found within its own territory.

In addition to giving China and other illiberal actors greater space to pursue their will against their neighbors and those in their territory, the GCI also shifts the questions of whose communication is valued in international discourse, and on what basis, to China’s advantage. Xi’s GCI speech moves uncritically back and forth between references to “countries” and “civilizations,” reflecting China’s conflation of the two concepts. The emphasis on “civilizations” arguably prioritizes China, as well as other states with linkages to ancient empires, including Beijing’s current illiberal partners Russia and Iran (Persia), and Global South countries China is courting (Egypt and Turkey) while deprivileging the voice of the United States as a relatively new and heterogeneous actor in “civilizational” terms.

Ironically, despite the GCI’s role as part of China’s ongoing attempts to court the Global South, the concept shows no awareness on Beijing’s part that, for Latin America, as in Africa and elsewhere, the legacy of “civilizations” in the contemporary context is problematic. The word is tied up in colonial

legacies and the continued marginalization of Indigenous peoples, both done in the name of “civilization.”

Xi speaks unproblematically about “modernization,” arguing that countries must [“push for creative transformation and innovative development of their fine traditional cultures.”](#) The GCI does not reflect that in much of the world, there is no consensus on historical legacy, how the “traditional” is to be incorporated in moving toward the “modern,” or even what “modernization” means and whether it is desirable. As China’s Uyghurs learned, in a totalitarian system, the party in power determines how a traditional culture is “modernized” – what elements are criminalized and what elements are safely “celebrated” in museums and folk festivals.

Finally, while the GCI “respect for diversity” supports non-interference in the internal affairs of authoritarian states, Xi’s call for [expanded people-to-people and inter-party dialogues](#) actually supports the very network building initiatives that are key to China’s subversive influence in the internal affairs of countries throughout the world. Indeed, Xi calls for a [“new type of international relations”](#) through [“fostering stronger partners with world political parties.”](#)

[**Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.**](#)

In the end, the effects of the GCI as a tool of strategic discourse will depend on the embrace of elites who believe it serves their self-interests, and who don’t focus on the contradictions within the GCI’s logic, or with China’s own behavior.

Western efforts to promote values and norms, concrete enough to be meaningful, enshrined in enforceable laws and international institutions, have been far from perfect. China's GCI reminds us of the lesson that the world has repeatedly learned through tragedy: the alternative that sounds too good to be true, usually is.

AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

R. Evan Ellis

R. Evan Ellis is a Latin America research professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed here are his own.

TAGS

[China Power](#) [Diplomacy](#) [East Asia](#) [China](#)

[China global leadership](#) [China Human Rights](#)

[China influence operations](#) [China non-interference policy](#)

[Chinese world order](#) [Global Civilization Initiative](#) [Xi Jinping](#)