

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: China wants to remake global governance – is the world ready for it?

Description: China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2023, aims to reshape global governance by emphasising mutual respect between civilizations and common human values. While it ostensibly appears to embrace diversity, some analysts argue that it primarily serves China's own interests by reshaping international norms in favour of authoritarian regimes. The GCI is part of a trio of multilateral initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative, seen as an effort by Beijing to expand its global influence and partnerships. But does the GCI possess genuine substance, or is it merely a public relations exercise? Would all nations be considered equal under Beijing's proposal? And how might the GCI transform our understanding of human rights? Seasoned China watchers Assoc Prof Delia Lin and Dr Sow Keat Tok join host Sami Shah to scrutinise the Global Civilization Initiative. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover: The *Ear to Asia* podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Sami Shah: Hello, I'm Sami Shah. This is Ear to Asia.

Sow Keat Tok: The way the political narrative has worked within modern China has been that the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, is the inevitable outcome of China's modernity and the Chinese civilization. That has been the kind of view of history that the CCP is trying to inject into its legitimacy. The CCP is the flag bearer of China's civilization moving forward. I think that is the kind of narrative that they are trying to create through this civilizational discussion.

Delia Lin: The Global Civilization Initiative is very tight with national security. It's very tight with development. So there are conditions on which some nations should be respected, some nations are not. Some people are respected, some people are not. It has to do with this people versus enemies. People who are considered as enemies of the people then don't deserve anything.

Sami Shah: In this episode, China wants to remake global governance – is the world ready for it?

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Proposed by President XI Jinping in 2023, China's Global Civilization Initiative, or GCI, envisions a fundamental overhaul of global institutions and aims to remake the future of global governance. On paper, the GCI is a blueprint for international relations that enshrines principles of mutual respect between civilizations, promoting diversity, common human values and people to people exchange. Yet, some analysts argue it merely reflects China's strategy of reshaping international norms to its own benefit and garnering support for its own political model. The GCI is one of a trio of multilateral initiatives put forth by Beijing, the others being the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative, which have already drawn representatives from the Global South, signaling China's efforts to expand its international influence and partnerships as US global leadership appears increasingly shaky. But does the GCI possess genuine substance, or is it merely a public relations exercise? How might the GCI transform our understanding of human rights? Would all civilizations, to use the initiative's terminology, truly be considered equal under Beijing's proposal? Or would China emerge as a natural civilizational hegemon? And what tangible outcomes is Beijing delivering under the aegis of the GCI? Joining me to look at China's Global Civilization initiative and what it may mean for the world, are seasoned China watchers and frequent guests of the program. Associate Professor Delia Lin and Doctor Sow Keat Tok, both from Asia Institute. Welcome back to Asia to Asia. Delia and Sow Keat.

Delia Lin: Thank you very much, Sami. Great to be here again.

Sow Keat Tok: Thanks, Sami. And hello, Delia again.

Delia Lin: Hello, Saki.

Sami Shah: So, a bit of a reunion here. Let's start then. First with you, Delia. Can you give us, in a nutshell, what is the GCI, the Global Civilization initiative.

Delia Lin: Um. Thanks, Sami. So basically, GCI was announced by Xi Jinping in his March 15th keynote speech, um, to the Chinese Communist Party High level dialogue with World Political leaders in 2023. So as you've just mentioned, it's the third of the three global initiatives that China has put forward after Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative. So nutshell of GCI really is to promote multiple versions of modernity. And of course, on the face value is to treat all civilizations equal, especially Chinese civilization. Uh, but I'll pass on to Sow Keat to give a bit more details. But nutshell is really to promote this idea of modernity. Uh, Chinese... well, not necessarily China style modernity, because China's style modernization, or in Chinese terms, it's called the Chinese path to modernization. That is a key theme of the 20th CCP or CPC in Chinese terms, 20th party Congress. So this is basically a moral and civilizational preparation for that vision of China's path to modernization.

Sami Shah: So is this then, Sow Keat, tied directly into China's broader foreign policy vision?

Sow Keat Tok: Um, one thing for sure is Xi Jinping doesn't drop things out from thin air for no reason. And obviously he has a big vision for what China would become in future and how it relates to the rest of the world, and to follow through. From what Delia has said on modernity, I totally agree with that idea. It's about a different kind of modernity that the West has been preaching all the time, as in like, you know, most of the time when we talk about modernity, we tend to talk about Westernization. And in this case, China is trying to preach a different form of modernity that is separate from the status quo. And that is something that, you know, brings back the history of China, China's own path of how modernity should be achieved and how they should pursue it. And they hope to do it together with the rest of the global South and those with rich civilizational heritage. So I think that kind of spells out the kind of path that China is hoping to achieve in the long run, or at least a vision that is spelled out for those that were dissatisfied with Western style of modernity.

Sami Shah: Sow Keat, then what exactly are the key themes under the Global Civilization Initiative that Chinese officials are emphasizing? If we were to kind of look at just the main points that they want to get across through their announcement.

Sow Keat Tok: I think the first thing just relates to what I just said. It has its own pathway, not the Western pathway of modernity. I think that is the fundamental principle behind this global, you know, civilizational initiative. But on top of that, I think there is also a theme to try to unite all the different civilizations, you know, and say that they own their own history is not the history that was written by the West. It is something that, relatively speaking, anti-West, but more like, you know, we are rejecting what the West is trying to tell us. Okay. Rather than totally refusing the West. Okay. But something that is built on the pride of their own history, pride of their own heritage and culture and, uh, it has a very strong element of ethno nationalism behind all these narratives. And it's about all these different unique cultures and civilizations coming together to, uh, create a world that belongs to them.

Sami Shah: Delete the word civilization in this – the Global Civilization Initiative seems a bit archaic. It's not a word that's very often bandied about or used in international relations or, you know, international plans when major nations announce them. What's the significance here? Why civilization?

Delia Lin: Yeah, I think Sow Keat's point is very important that it's a different way of framing modernity, because when we think of modernization, we think of Westernization, we think about technological advancement that's led by the US especially. So here is we're really looking at a very different way of framing modernity through civilizational perspective. And again, it's a word that's rarely used in talking about modernization because civilization has so many meanings and it has been used by different societies in different ways, and in China as well in governance. And I think a way of looking at the mindset of China's government and why it brings civilization to the fore – what are the key themes? I think it's important to really, first of all, understand what they are saying themselves. I encourage the audience to also read a global Community of Shared Future China's proposals and actions, published in September 2023. And I'll just quote the paper that how China sees the key themes of this whole GCI talk is that it calls for “jointly advocating respect for the diversity of civilizations and seeing this as a premise for development and jointly advocating the common values of humanity, jointly advocating the importance of continuity and evolution of civilizations, and jointly advocating closer international people to people exchanges and cooperations.”

So all sounds great, and the Global Civilization Initiative “makes a sincere call for the world to enhance inter-civilization exchanges and dialogue and promote human

progress with inclusiveness and mutual learning, inspiring the building of a global community of shared future”.

Sami Shah: So to interrupt you, but what does civilization mean there? The meaning of the word civilization, you've said, means something very particular in the Chinese context. What is that? How is that different from the way, for example, people in the West might understand civilization?

Delia Lin: A very good question. I think that's where discussion gets interesting is that when we look at the nuanced meaning of civilization and different layers of the meanings of civilization, then that's where. This is where it gets interesting. I mean, the civilization has got this colonial legacy so it can be used civilization then the opposite of it is savages. I mean, that's it has a colonial history heritage of it. So it's very interesting. China is actually using that word that has a colonial heritage to basically decolonize the discourse of progress and modernization. Is that going to work? I mean, that's that's really interesting. And if we look at the document of *Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposal and Actions*, the word civilization, if you just look at the use of the word civilization, it has so many meanings. So it could be a collective group of people with civilization, with cultural heritage, as Sowk Keat mentioned. And that would resonate with a lot of civilizational states and states that with that long and proud of their cultural heritage, it can mean that sometimes it means behavior, the type of civilized behavior, especially in domestic civil sort of social governance, which is what I've been working on. And those regulations on civilized behavior. So that can be can be used as a almost like an adjective. It can also mean ideology and institution. If we look at the white paper of *A Global Community of Shared Future*, it's used with institution and ideology as well to say, well, that's part of civilization. So that's where it gets interesting. So it can carry that very strong political overtone.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah, indeed. The terms civilization is hard to pin down. And as far as this discourse is concerned, it seems to act like a flag, which, uh, you know, asking for other so-called civilizations to rally around and said, “All right, whatever you call civilization, if you consider yourself a civilization, then yes, come around and join the party. We can come and forge a common future together. We can all celebrate our differences together. We can celebrate our cultures together.

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And, uh, yeah, that is something that would be, you know, running as a counter to what the West has been talking about all the while. You know, civilization does not belong to the West. Civilization belongs to us, too. I think that is the kind of message that they were trying to send. So the important thing is not to see civilization as what it means. But you know what it really...

Delia Lin: Allows.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah, it allows into the discourse. I think that is the that is the beauty of this, uh, discourse in the very first place.

Sami Shah: Both of you have talked about how one of the main defining elements here is a break with the Western traditions, with regards to modernity, with regards to civilization, with regards to cultures and harmony, etc. just focusing on, for example, modernity. What is the difference here? What would Chinese modernity or the symbol of Chinese modernity through the GCI look like when compared to the Western model of modernity and whatever that might be? Sow Keat?

Sow Keat Tok: Um, the way the political narratives has worked within China, modern China, has been that the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, is the inevitable outcome of China's modernity and the Chinese civilization. That has been the kind of teleological, uh, view of history that the CCP is trying to inject into its legitimacy. And that civilization pretty much follows through from there, as in the CCP is the end of China's civilization, is the is the flag bearer of China's civilization moving forward. I think that is the kind of narrative that they are trying to create through this civilizational discussion. So politically, it means a lot to the CCP, because it means that it lends legitimacy to a system that is not directly elected. Uh, if you consider how elections, so-called elections are being conducted in China, there is no feedback system, but they try to create an aura that they were legitimate rulers of the Chinese civilization. And that is something that Xi Jinping has been trying to achieve since he gained power back in 2012. You know, the way that he brought in history, the way that, uh, he brought in how, um, the CCP is a part of the struggle of Chinese modern history in particular, and how CCP is forging China's modernity in the name of the Chinese nation. So that is the kind of uh narrative that all all come together in one big round.

Sami Shah: Delia, is that then China saying that the end result of any great civilization is the CCP? And if you're part of the GCI, then you should also work towards a CCP like or, you know, just be under the CCP organization.

Delia Lin: Um, of course, that's not on the paper.

Sami Shah: So is it an implicit message? Yes.

Delia Lin: The implicit message is absolutely there. But what I would like to add that is also civilization in the. Chinese text and also means humankind, also means human society, because the guiding party for this GCI is the Chinese Communist Party that's given. So if the whole world buys in it, then the CCP is basically the world leader. It's not just a national leader. So the political legitimacy problem is completely solved once for all. But the way it achieves this is not to say how great the CCP is in the document, but to actually highlight this is for the survival, very survival of human society, because civilization is also defined as human society as well in the document. So to say that human society basically is at a crisis. And if we don't do something about it, the human society, which is *Wénmíng* (文明), is going to disappear for the whole world.

Sami Shah: One of the aspects of the human society that there seems to be a great deal of focus on, especially when it comes to China related topics, is human rights. Does the GCI address human rights as we commonly understand them? Sow Keat.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah. Very interestingly, the most important part of GCI is the diversity, the emphasis on diversity. And that is in direct rejection of what we so call universal values. So in this case, you know, again, human rights as a modern concept, it was very much owned by the West as far as this discourse is concerned. And human rights, if it exists within the CGI, is actually something that everyone should have their own set of definition vis a vis human rights. No one human right is above another, so to speak. So China could have its own version of human rights as much as Russia could have its own version of human rights, as much as India could have its own version of human rights. The emphasis of civilization is precisely because of that. Okay, we all have our heritage, we all have our values, we all have our customs. And human rights should not be something that is divorced from those kind of heritage, values and history that we come from. So in this case, China will

say, okay, we have a set of human rights that's unique to China and applied to China and being administered by the CCP. Okay. And that should not contradict with that in Russia or in India, okay. Let alone the one that is preached by the West. So when it comes to human rights, that is where the you know, the contention comes in between what the so-called West has been creating for the past hundred years for the global society. Okay. So the emphasis here is not just the global society, it's individual human societies that are right at the center here. And each human society should be allowed to create their own standards that govern the way it should be run.

Delia Lin: But what about Western society then? Should Western society should they...?

Sow Keat Tok: Should have their own set of human rights, but.

Delia Lin: Not to impose on the others.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah, not imposing on the others. That's absolutely I think that is the fundamental idea.

Sami Shah: Does that mean then the GCI is agnostic? It is one of those, you know, you can bring what you want to it, or are there actual philosophical underpinnings and ideological underpinnings to the GCI that are particular to it? Does it come with any philosophies of its own? Is Chinese Marxism a part of it inherently, or, you know, can anyone make it what they want? Delia.

Delia Lin: Can I just go back a little bit? Sami? Um, because I just need to add a bit on human rights as well. Sure.

Sami Shah: Yeah.

Delia Lin: In the document in GCI itself, I think that's also a very important aspect, which answers your question as well. It's it's how do you approach the question of the people? I think if we want to see anything that has any relevance to human rights is really the mentioning of the word people in the document, which is a lot because GCI basically claims that we must put the people first and ensure modernization is people centered. So that is where humans come in into this document. And to say

that development is not about stats on the paper, it's not about the numbers. I believe that many countries would agree with that. It's about the well-being of the people. But what is interesting here is human rights in terms of plural. So it's about the people. And the people is a very political term. So it has to do with this philosophical underpinning of people versus enemies. So who are our friends? Who are our enemies? So people are the friends, but there are enemies as well. So then people who are humans, who are considered as enemies of the people, then don't deserve anything. So there was that underlying philosophy in there. So that is, I think, where there won't be much buy in from many countries, is that plural understanding of the rights of the individuals, because if you look at Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first sentence is all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; it's about all human beings, regardless of any conditions that they are in. But GCI is very tied with national security, it's very tied with development. So there are conditions on which that some people are respected, some people are not. Some nations should be respected, some nations are not. If you really look at some philosophical underpinning, but again, we need to look at philosophical underpinning as we interpreted it. But also there are philosophical underpinnings that the text itself articulates, and there were differences in those two.

Sami Shah: One of the things that GCI has been compared to is the 1980s Asian values discourse, um, from the 80s and 90s. In fact. Uh, the Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad from Malaysia, they were both pushing this through much of the 80s and 90s. Is this similar? What are the similarities between what they were pushing for then and what China is pushing for now?

Sow Keat Tok: Um, the Asian values debate is grounded in a sovereign state system. So it's about that culture within the sovereign state. So it kind of, uh, puts itself above the sovereign state by saying that, okay, not all sovereign states are made the same. They have different constituents, they have different cultural components, they have different heritage overlay. And in this case, Asian values or the values that reside within the society that the state has encompassed, is something that we should all be taking into account when we look at international relations. So that is the gist of what Asian values debate was all about in the very first place. And Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohamad all talked about the greatness of the Confucius values, the greatness of the Islamic values. It's a way to bolster this

argument, but civilization has a very different idea altogether. I think civilization is not just about something. It cannot be something that parachuted from elsewhere, like what is going on in Malaysia and in Singapore. Okay, Singapore in particular cannot claim to be a civilisational state, even though, uh, Lee Kuan Yew, during his time he talked about Singapore having mostly Confucius values. But civilization means countries that can really kind of link back into history, centuries, if not millennia. Okay. Um, China, India, Egypt, Turkey. Uh, in more recent discussion, Turkey is really one of those that come into the picture. So those kind of idea that we have a long heritage which we can tap into and whatever society that evolves is a kind of organic evolution of what history has brought to.

All right. Whereas more artificial creation, such as Malaysia and Singapore, they couldn't actually claim civilization. Okay? And they are products of what Delia would deem as colonization. And I agree, they are products of that. And they can only say that we are Asian because we hold to certain values. You know, our society is an amalgamation of all these kind of values coming together, but they are not civilizational in that sense. There's a big difference between what the current CGI is all about and what previously Asian values is all about. But the aims of these two discourses are pretty much similar in a way that they try to unite those have nots within the, uh, international system that were very much marginalized by the United States and the West's dominance in the global system. All right. And those which has a lot of grievances to talk about when it comes to how universal values are being imposed on their societies, how universal standards are being applied, regardless of the local context. All those grieving countries come together and talk about it and form a community, form a kind of brotherhood or sisterhood that, you know, binds them together to fight against Western dominance. So the aim, the objective is very similar, but the audience that it preached to could be very different.

Sami Shah: Delia, do you agree that the idea of Asian values, you know, from the 80s and 90s is not just a first draft of what the GCI is, that there is a fundamental difference between the two approaches.

Delia Lin: I think philosophically, ideologically there were fundamental differences. I mean, I think the similarity really is that anti-west sentiment that's embedded in it. I think that's the only way that I can see how GCI can resonate with some nations or some civilizations – is that Anti-west sentiment? But then back to your question,

Sami, “What kind of Westernization that GCI is against and rationally and what kind of values that it's going to promote?”

It's not really that clear apart from socialist core values. Um, whether that's Confucian values. So Asian values, I mean, as Sow Keat eloquently puts, it's from that sovereign state where civilization, not many nations can claim that civilization or heritage. But I think another really key difference here is that GCI has a much bigger global ambition than Asian values. So Asian values is really as a way of resisting and genuinely promoting some of the values that are common to many Asian countries – Confucian values – and they were specific values that many individuals, many people would actually resonate with. Whereas GCI has got that global is not about Asia. There was no word “Asian” at all in GCI or any related document. It's really about global – Africa, it's about Arabic countries; it's not about Asia at all. So it's not to highlight Asia. It is against West. But again, documents say it in a very implicit way.

Sami Shah: Well, then let's talk about some of the criticisms of the GCI since we're going in that direction, naturally. Delia, staying with you. What have been some of the main things that people have pointed to the GCI and said, these are dangerous or these are problematic?

Delia Lin: Uh, I mean, the the key criticism is about what kind of governance really GCI is bring about. Is it going to bring about a more equal and diverse as it says, inclusive – “diversity”, “inclusion” are the key words. Is it really capable of bringing a more equal, just, diverse, inclusive community of the world or is actually going to support authoritarian regime or justify authoritarian regime from a civilizational perspective, using those civilizational arguments to support authoritarian regime or dictatorial or totalitarian regime? That's the key concern of many, many people who are watching this GCI and how it pans out.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah, absolutely. I think just, uh, lends a lot of credibility to the current regime, whichever they are. Okay. In, uh, governing what is within this country or what is within this civilization, for that matter? I point out two contradictions here. First thing is that even when we talk about China as a civilisational state, there's a big problem within there as, and you know, what exactly is China? It's China, the one that was created by the first emperor, or the current

modern state that the CCP governed over. All right. It's the modern state that CCP governed over. Then you are actually not looking at one single human society, not one single civilization or society, but multiple civilizational societies in there. What about the Uyghurs? What about the Tibetans? You know, what about the Mongolians? Okay, all the minority ethnic groups in China all have their own narrative of what civilization is and what the CCP has been trying to create is one single Chinese civilization, and that itself is a contradiction of reality on the ground. So it creates a kind of tension in there, as in like, you know, can we really call China a civilization or a kind of amalgamation of different civilizations? Okay, that's the first contradiction that brings to my second contradiction.

Sow Keat Tok: Can civilization sit tightly with how the world is being organized today, which is sovereign state system? Obviously, no, because sovereign state system was created out from a very different social and political context, economic context, too, it's based on colonization, followed by the wars, followed by the evolution of how, uh, the idea of sovereignty became the prevalent way of organizing human societies. That obviously runs counter to what civilization is. Civilization has no boundaries. It's a cultural being, it's an ethnic being. Then you will see those sovereign states as what we talk about when we talk about Asian values. So marginal civilizational states like Thailand, are they civilization or are they modern state? Then there is this new debate coming out. Is this the way that we should be ordering our world? Are we still going with the sovereign state system, or is the world moving on to a civilizational one, or back to a civilizational one for that matter? So there is this huge contradiction that this narrative still needs to resolve. And I don't think it is fundamentally resolvable, not philosophically, of course, because it means that you need to revamp the entire system to accommodate this. Otherwise, those contradictions and tensions will continue to sit in this discourse.

Sami Shah: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular at Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by Doctor Sow Keat Tok and Associate Professor Delia Lin, and we're discussing the

implications of China's Global Civilization Initiative. Let's take a step back then and get a broader view. Gci is the third pillar of post Bri initiatives announced by Xi Jinping in this decade. The earlier two were the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative. Delia, can you just give us a brief summary of both of these pillars, the GDI and the GSI?

Delia Lin: Yeah, um, a good question. And China sees them three as integrated. So that's where, exactly where the problems are and really highlights the kind of tension that Saki has just mentioned, because civilizational discourse should be about cultures, really. And then when you have security, Global Security Initiative that highlights the importance of national security. And when you have that national security embedded into the three narratives, the three initiatives, basically you're putting opposing things together as an integrated whole. And the more you do it, the more it will explode. It would explode. So in China's government's own terms, and again, back to the document of *Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions* published in September 2023, they really see the three initiatives as integrated, as complementary to say that peace and stability, material sufficiency and cultural ethical enrichment represent the three goals of human society. So about peace and stability, that's security. But national security is not just about that. Of course, within China, this massive discourse of overall national security outlook, that's basically the guiding ideology in China. Now, it's more than peace and stability. Material sufficiency – that's about development and cultural ethical enrichment. So to see those three as key pillars of goals of human society. So when China promotes global initiatives in the three dimensions, from China's government's perspective, they think they've covered all they covered those three complementary and one leads to the other, one supports the other one is the prerequisite for the other. But that's where the problems are, because you can't really put all those opposing ideas together as a whole and hoping they might work together.

Sami Shah: Sow Keat, what's the plan here? What does it seem like they're trying? Will China use these initiatives, these three pillars to supplant policy frameworks within the Bretton Woods global institutions? Or will it, you know, create new ones that will compete?

Sow Keat Tok: Um, at the moment, there is no clear indication that China is going to supplant the Bretton Woods system. Okay. I think this is something that we have to make clear right from the start. But will something emerge eventually is a big question. I think that's the billion, trillion dollar question there. Right now. I think China, by throwing out all this discourse, there's actually creating a kind of, uh, problem for itself because of all the contradictions that Delia has highlighted earlier on, there will need some time to try and reconcile those differences if they ever get to that. But progressively, you see how these three initiatives will be used as pillars to support China's foreign policy initiatives, as well as the way the multilateral discussions that China will be engaging in. So it will be something that will work parallel with each other. And, uh, yeah, eventually what emerged, I think, is not so much about what China wants. Yes, China intended something, but eventually it will be something that different forces of foreign policy comes together and, uh, create.

Sami Shah: One of the things that's, um, you both have mentioned is how much this is targeted at the West. It seems to be trying to present an alternative system to the West. One assumes that means that they're hoping for sympathy from the global South. In both your opinion, starting with you, Sow Keat, and then going to Delhi after that, do you think the Global South will like the GCI and find it more attractive than the current Western models?

Sow Keat Tok: Uh, as a discourse, I mean philosophically and ideologically, I don't think all the global South will be agreeable to that. In the first place, when we talk about the global South, it doesn't mean just civilisational states like India or I know Russia. There are other a lot of states that were born out from colonization, in fact, easily, if you count more than 90% of the states, uh, in the global South, were considered global South actually come from, uh, are products of colonization and decolonization. So are they going to buy into the idea that, you know, we are all civilizational states? I don't think it's that easy in the very first place. But as a rallying flag of anti West, I think the GCI is definitely a very appealing idea, okay, that other countries can buy into, especially if, especially if and that's a big especially if that China can back it up with its financial clout. And that is something that is kind of a shaky at the moment as we see how China's economy is going. So I think it presents an interesting narrative out there, but the buy ins, I think, is not as guaranteed as what some academics or observers would deem it to be.

Sami Shah: Do you agree that the Global South would be a little bit skeptical of the GCI?

Delia Lin: I agree with that. I hope that I can disagree so we can have a debate, but I actually agree that GCI, compared to even the previous – the Global Development Initiative, would have more buy in because it has money involved in it and it is to promote agenda 2030 for the UN. So there was a lot of buy in for Global Development Initiative because it's in concrete terms, it's about poverty relief. There are lots of initiatives that there was a lot of money that's behind it. Whereas GCI civilization is a very difficult discourse. It's a very popular discourse within China, but as you mentioned, it's an old tome and it has that colonial legacy. So nations are talking about colonization and decolonization, but bringing civilization back as a idea, is that going to travel very well amongst Global South? I'm very skeptical of that. But really the only attractive part is really this diverse civilization, different models of modernization. It may encourage the states to think about their own path and to link to their own cultural heritage. Beyond that, I don't really see a strong sort of buy in of this idea.

Sami Shah: What's the reaction been? It's been a year since Xi Jinping launched the GCI. Has anyone had a strong positive approach to it?

Sow Keat Tok: I think so far you're probably seeing a kind of welcoming position from Russia. Iran seems to be happy to call itself a civilization, Turkey. Um, but beyond that, I think very few other countries actually saw that GCI as part of their motive to strive for a different path of modernity. When we talk about the GSI and the GDI.

Sami Shah: So the security initiative and the development initiative respectively, yes.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah, they are sovereign state based. Okay. I think there is greater responses from the developing countries and the Global South in general, as Delia rightly pointed out. But when it comes to the Global Civilization Initiative, it's hard to do it. It's really difficult. Um, okay, then we bring in a predicament. China calls out the Chinese civilization. So is the Chinese civilization inclusive of the Greater China. Okay. And Greater China would well involve Singapore. Singapore would not want to

be part of the Chinese civilization, as far as I see. Yeah, they're happy to call themselves Chinese society. But being a Chinese civilization means a very different set of loyalty that goes out of that sovereignty nexus. And likewise, you know, is, uh, Malaysia and Indonesia going to be claimed by the Islamic civilization? I don't think they are happy to be part of that club. But, you know, sovereign states being what they are, they will try to play it strategically. They will try to see where their biggest interest lies, and they will be careful of choosing the things that they like and discarding those that they don't. So at this point, I think we see greater buy ins for the security and development part, but less so on the civilization part for that reason.

Sami Shah: Well, then that raises the very obvious question of what are the outcomes? What are the intended tangible outcomes that can be mapped here? The Global Development Initiative and the Security Initiative, both they have tangible things like loans and military hardware and security forces being deployed on request and development projects, etc., that can be measured and seen. The GCI seems so vague and nebulous from all your descriptions. How much money has Beijing even committed to this and how will we know? Or how will Beijing decide whether or not it's a success?

Sow Keat Tok: I think that is a question best asked to Xi Jinping. I don't think he has an idea in mind.

Sami Shah: He hasn't agreed to come on the podcast yet. But we'll keep asking.

Delia Lin: Absolutely. But also, I think another way of measuring success is not just about how much money that is invested in this particular initiative, because this initiative, the purpose of this initiative is to really create that kind of civilization and legitimacy of the CCP.

Sami Shah: So it's a PR move more than the other two.

Delia Lin: Yeah. And all the people, people relations that China is doing in the tourism or the Hello China program, they are all under Global Civilization initiative. So all those people, people relations, they're all couched under that initiative.

Sow Keat Tok: I think that is one dimension. Now, that's the interesting part. I'm going to disagree a little bit with Delia here. Yes. At the moment it seems like it's all PR and nothing else, but what eventually transpires would be closer relationship between China and its so-called civilizational partners, like Russia, like Iran, like Turkey. Okay, it's really to kind of like create a wedge between this so-called civilizational states and the West. Turkey, for example, is part of the NATO initiative, is close to Europe, but it's beginning to be different, to act differently from its European partners. And that presents a kind of opportunity for China to drive a wedge between Turkey and, uh, the EU. So I think those are issues that you cannot be quantified, so to speak. You can see greater space for China to talk to all its civilizational partners. I think that is the important takeaway. But is it going to transpire to something that is more concrete and tangible? Well, I don't think that was really much in mind in the very first place. But I go back to my point, if you want to know exactly what they want to get out from it, you have to ask XI Jinping for it.

Sami Shah: Well, we can't then ignore some of the global context that's required here. The wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, the US and China continuing to be locked in greater power competitions, the influence of the US and its allies and its legitimacy in certain parts of the Global South, etc., being seen as questionable given its alliances with Ukraine and Israel. Does this all result then, in the global world order swinging in China's favor? Is China playing a long game here that they might be winning at? Sow Keat, start with you.

Sow Keat Tok: As what we have discussed. I don't think they are winning. It presents an alternative, definitely, but I think it's a long throw at things. If China is going to win this because the sovereign state system, despite all the misgivings about it, is actually a very solid system at the moment. Okay. We have not seen an international system that is so rock solid as it is right now. And because there are a lot of winners in this system, okay, the sovereign states, after they decolonized, they have membership prestige in that system. It's hard to say. Okay, we are going back to a civilizational one where, you know, some civilization sits above the others and, you know, suddenly there is a hierarchical system which puts some of those smaller states in jeopardy. So at the moment I don't see that as emerging, but I think there's an alternative there. And, uh, whether or not it takes off depends very much on how China and its civilizational allies are going to support this.

Sami Shah: Delia is looking for that point of disagreement between you and so Keat, is this it? Do you think China is winning?

Delia Lin: I don't think China is winning. Again, I agree with Sow Keat on that, but I do agree that this is a long game for sure. And what I'd like to add to the discussion is also how that works for domestic. Um, China wants to win. I mean, first of all, China really needs to show to the world that its domestic governance is working. At the moment, it's shaky. Um, but I think the relevance of those global initiatives, um, throughout our discussion, we mainly look at foreign policies and how China interacts with the world through those global initiatives. But I think a missing point is not that we're going to discuss it, is really how that works with domestic policies. Because if we look at domestic policies, social governance within China, with those global initiatives are working hand in glove with domestic policies as well, and to project that image that China is leading the world. So I think in that regard, it's successful. Those global initiatives are working in terms of projecting that global leadership of the CCP amongst the Chinese citizens. I think for that part, it is working, but convincing the international communities. I don't believe so.

Sami Shah: Thank you so much. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by Doctor Sow Keat Tok and Associate Professor Delia Lin, and we've been discussing the implications of China's Global Civilization initiative. Thank you both.

Sow Keat Tok: Thank you Sami.

Delia Lin: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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