



Debates on Human Rights – thinking philosophy, political economy, sociology, political science, psychology and arts
for understanding law

Working Papers on contemporary challenges for understanding law in a multipolar world

Edited on behalf of the working group Human Rights – Universal and Global, a research group hosted by the Human Rights Centre, Law School, Central South University, Changsha, PRC

Responsible: JUAN LI/JUNXIANG MAO/PETER HERRMANN

Peter Herrmann
**Multipolarity and Chinese modernisation — Misconceptions Of The
Past, Perspectives For The Future¹**

¹ Edited Contribution for the Conference Multipolarisation and Chinese Modernisation, Shanghai, December 2025.

Multipolarity and Chinese modernisation — Misconceptions Of The Past, Perspectives For The Future

Bio	5
Abstract	1
Introduction	1
Setting the Scene	2
Some terminological clarification	4
Crisis as stepping stone into an era of the Wealth of the Planet	8
A New United Nations?	10
Conclusion	12

Multipolarity And Chinese Modernisation — Misconceptions Of The Past, Perspectives For The Future

Bio

Peter Herrmann, Prof. Dr. habil; Senior Research Fellow at the Human Rights Centre, Law School, Central South University; Visiting professor at the Center for Digital Intelligence Research of Excellent Traditional Sports Culture; Member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, and member of the European academic community; he was awarded the 2023 China Friendship Award for Foreign Experts.

He has previously held positions amongst others at the University College of Cork, Corvinus University, Budapest, Hungary; Zhejiang University, Hangzhou; Pontificia Università San Tommaso d'Aquino – Angelicum of the Vatican, Rome. He also worked for instance for the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Law/Social Law and Social Policy, Munich and the Foreign Ministry in Havana.

His research focuses on the systemic relationship between law and economics, digitalisation and capital structure, and extended regulation theory.



Multipolarity And Chinese Modernisation — Misconceptions Of The Past, Perspectives For The Future

Abstract

“Polarity”, meaning speaking of poles, refers to two opposing ends. The idea behind the term multipolarity is not compatible with such concept. On the one hand we are dealing with a fragmented geo-political order; on the other hand indicators suggest a “new hegemony”, namely the focus on a Community of Common Destiny. Especially Chinese Initiatives point into the direction of moving into this direction, developing responsible politics: accepting difference and different ways, while moving away from the Wealth of Nations towards the Wealth of the Planet.

Introduction

While we speak — for good reasons — of multipolarity, we easily forget the core matter of globalisation and universalism: it is about power structures. An often-suggested notion of globalisation is the assumption of equalisation — a telling metaphor refers to *‘the tin of coke in every single hut’*. Indeed, such development should not be overlooked. However, issuing such trends as socio-cultural domination makes us forget that the underlying core is economic power. The underlying understanding of human rights since the inauguration of the UDHR must be seen against this background and as such as formational. This evokes the following qualifying aspects:

- (i) it presumes the Rostowian understanding of modernisation — an explicitly anti-communist concept
- (ii) it claims that this constellation will still allow the so-called “developed” countries to exploit the “less developed”.

Importantly, reference is made to the trinity of the French revolution from 1789: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Commonly ignored is that liberty had been understood as economic

freedom for the emerging bourgeoisie, leaving equality and fraternity subordinate and moreover even defined in dependency of this liberty — turning Jean-Jacques Rousseau around: While he stated that

[t]he first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society

the new understanding claims: the liberty to enclose a piece of land, saying this is mine, is the greatest expression of the new age.

Against this background, the UN had been offering a platform for pushing back the violence entailed in the understanding of liberty, supporting a solidaristic notion of equality between nations. However, reflecting the dominant power relationships, the result had often been paradoxical, namely ending in supporting individualist concepts of liberty, while neglecting the need to develop a clear understanding of the social as constitutive for the development of social personalities.

Setting the Scene

Charles Dickens wrote in 1859 in his *Tale of Two Cities*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

These lines could also be written these days, though — symptomatically — we would probably not find such poetic, emphatic wording; instead, formulations are today carried by dispassion and dystopia and statistical, evidence-based speak. Dispassion and dystopia characterise very much the current political scene of the fortresses, still under the leadership of the old, self-appointed world gendarme, i.e. the United States of America.

To understand today's processes, it is useful to look at the historical reasons behind the leadership.

Giovanni Arrighi suggested a shift of centres, referring in his analysis to questions of political economy:

- Genoese cycle (15th-16th centuries): Dominated by Italian city states, especially Genoa, with a focus on trade and finance.
- Dutch cycle (late 16th-18th century): The Netherlands establishes dominance in trade, shipping and finance.
- British cycle (19th-early 20th century): Britain leads the industrial revolution and dominates in manufacturing, trade and colonialism.
- American cycle (20th century): The US rises to global hegemonic power based on mass production, technological innovation and military strength.

Presented as table we arrive at the following:

Centre	Time (century)	Focus of accumulation	Spatial dimension
Italian City States	15-16	Trade/finance	city/region
Netherlands	16-18	International trade/finance	sea
Britain	19-20	Industrial production I	nation
America	20	Industrial production II	domination

For the present analysis this is relevant (i) as it emphasises the economic foundation for the structuration of the superstructure, namely in very concrete terms the economy defining the regulatory mechanisms and moreover (ii) the definition of justice which is underlying the concrete regulatory mechanisms.

Speaking of multipolarity is only correct in the sense of a transitional phase where the old dominant system is still in place, even able to maintain its key position, but it is not anymore unquestionable. In other words, we can take up on what Antonio Gramsci said, namely that

*crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.*²

However, as it will be presented later, the term multipolarity is not correct and we should speak of a fragmented reality.

² Gramsci, Antonio, 1930: Quaderni del carcere, vol. I: quaderni 1.5; Edizione Critica del Istituto Gramsci a Cura di Valentino Gerratana; Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1975; translation P.H.

Translating this into a Human Right perspective means to look at the central tension that concerns human rights: the claim of being universal and even eternal must be qualified. The shift of the centre had always been related to changing class relationships and in more concrete terms: the shift of the centre had been result and condition of the range of political-economic development.

We can — metaphorically — refer to quantum entanglement, i.e.

the idea that particles of the same origin, which were once connected, always stay connected. Even if they separate and move far apart in time and space, they continue to share something beyond a mere bond — they shed their original quantum states and take on a new, united quantum state which they maintain forever. This means if something happens to one particle, it affects all the others with which it's entangled.³

Rearranging and extending Arrighi's grouping results in an interesting picture of the reference for defining rights, here the “threshold countries” and the attribution of rights is added:

Centre	Time	Focus of accumulation	Spatial dimension	Bearer of rights
Italian City States	15-16	Trade/finance	city/region	nobility
Netherlands	16-18	International trade/finance	sea	citizen
Britain	19-20	Industrial production I	nation	bourgeois
America	20	Industrial production II	domination	citizenry
Threshold countries	21	Industrial production III	cooperation	denizen

Some terminological clarification

However, we face a terminological issue — two issues must be addressed:

Speaking today of multipolarity as new pattern suggests that we have had a unipolar system before. Polarity is, however, depending on the tension of two poles that are in fact standing against each other — polarity is bound to such tension, it is reflection not of

³ NASA: What Is the Spooky Science of Quantum Entanglement?; <https://science.nasa.gov/what-is-the-spooky-science-of-quantum-entanglement/>; venerdì 26 settembre 2025

pillars but poles, and any pole is part of a vector with two end, each of them looking for more weight on its own side, taken from its opponent. Multipolarity would then mean that we are witnessing a situation where different poles cross each other, but only two ends are relating to each other. So, reference to polarity in the strict sense is problematic. In fact we are witnessing the breakdown of the hegemony of the USA or 'the West', subsequently we witness that the geo-political order is under pressure.

While the position of the superpower is threatened, there are two more issues that need to be addressed: First, the currency of the global order remains in principle the old one, namely the production of commodities, i.e. products that are entering the market for exchange and exchange by means of money. Second, the process of production and the character of products are undergoing far-reaching changes although the essence, i.e. the character of commodity production is not effected: we can speak of a new accumulation regime that is establishing and unfolding before our eyes. Elementary to this are

- digitisation
- miniaturisation
- virtualisation.

Speaking of "exchange by means of money" must be spelled out: while money remains a tool, making exchange possible and easier, it is also gaining independence, the ultimate transformation is the fetishisation: money is valued for the sake of itself, without having a genuine own, inherent money. A great many coins would have to be melted down to forge a frying pan from the metal; a great many banknotes would be needed to jot down notes — even for a short story — on the blank margins. From here complex mechanisms are emerging, changing mode of regulation, life regime and mode of living. The scaffold of the old centre and the centre-periphery relation is thus under pressure. Not least we see far-reaching changes of the institutional mechanisms:

- more people are seen as bearers of rights,
- not least due to the increasing hollowing out of the principle of nationality
- while the realisation and implementation of rights is increasingly difficult.

Taking again up on physics: we see in global relations a similar leap as we witnessed in physics, where the orientation on and by quantum entanglement replaced the earlier

causal and linear understanding of the world. As the saying goes, Newton had been hit by an apple — a manageable constellation; however we are moving towards a situation that is too complex to control:

Classical physics is the force governing an extremely predictable world, where an apple set on a table stays there until something causes it to move again. In the quantum world, not only can the apple end up on Mars, but, hypothetically, it could exist both on the table and on Mars at the same time. It could even be inextricably tied to another apple in some other part of the universe through entanglement. Thus, 'reality' as we know it is much more uncertain, with the possibility for many solutions or outcomes to exist, rather than just one.⁴

For Human Rights this has a major consequence and we must redefine “multipolarity”.

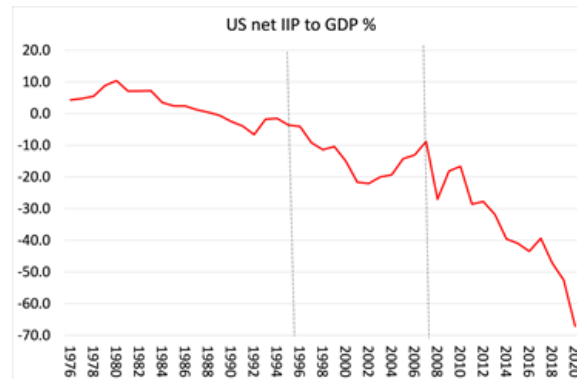
We do not witness a shift towards a multitude of poles — that would also mean that we have different rights. Instead, we are witnessing the reshaping of the system by a move from a power-based global order to a rights-based global order. Part of this is the widening of the reach and scope of rights. In other words; central is not breaking the global policing power of the USA, but the necessity of overcoming their definitional power over rights in the interest of the USA — *Making America Great Again* is not least a matter of reclaiming the rights for Americans first, or bluntly: it is necessary to reject the claim that right is what is good for America (and “the West”) — that would be a new edition of the displacement of indigenous peoples, which has shaped (and still shapes) policy in the US and Australia.⁵

It is too often forgotten that the United Nations is not the only institution established after WW II — more or less adjunct we see World Bank, IMF, later the WTO, thus together an enormous regulatory body to control the global economy, mostly in favour of the USA. However, looking at some figures shows a worrying picture if we take the perspective from the US:

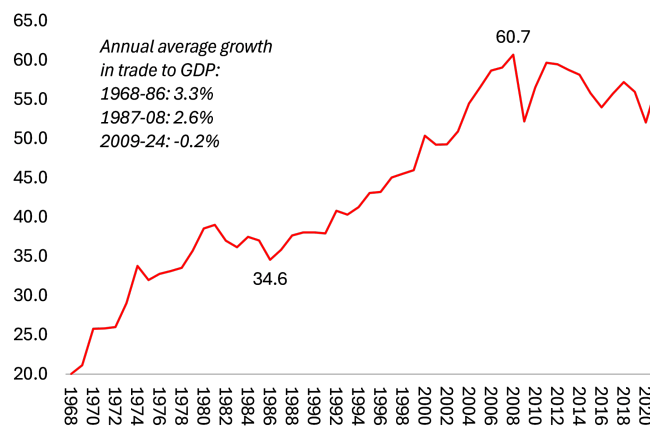
⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ using inverted commas is reasoned by the reflections of “Three Avoids” - see Finnerty, J. (2025) “The Three Avoids: Closing Remarks by Moderator”, Parallel Session 2 Part 2. The 80th Anniversary of the United Nations: Toward the Universalization of Human Rights, Central South University Human Rights Center, Changsha, China, 18th October 2025; <https://www.hrug.legal/?p=810>

The International investment position



6



7

While a quantification of human rights is hardly possible, we could metaphorically use these tables to present the decline of the US-centred definition of Human Rights and their use as tool for the implementation of the MAGA-strategy (actually not a new claim). While defining HR followed the interest of strengthening the Rostowian model of (economic) modernisation, we see the potential of a shift to a different focus, namely the orientation on Human Rights as instrument to foster the *Wealth of the Planet*.

⁶ <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/image-14.png>; <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2025/09/23/the-un-at-80-ignored-and-irrelevant/>; giovedì 25 settembre 2025; source IMF)

⁷ <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/un80a.png>; <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2025/09/23/the-un-at-80-ignored-and-irrelevant/>; giovedì 25 settembre 2025; source: World Bank

Crisis as stepping stone into an era of the Wealth of the Planet

This is, of course, first and foremost a geo-political question: the role of the USA as central and sole definitional power is crumbling in several regards; the ecological model of exporting environmental hazards, the sole orientation on quantitative measures of performance, the social exclusion as consequence of hyper-individualism, the unrestrained willingness to use armed force as a means of regulating international relations and the spread of violence as a means of resolving private and political conflicts are main issues in question. The desperate attempt to answer these challenges through nationalistic or regionalistic (EU) measures leads to a dead end for at least two reasons: (i) challenges are not being addressed, but rather exported in terms of time or geography; (ii) those countries and regions to which the export is to take place have now gained strength, allowing them to reject those export strategies. Developments in South-Africa, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia and international cooperations as BRICS and the New Silk Road — and not least probably the strongest “alternative force” China — are showing the increasing strength of alternatives.

Interestingly, Henry Kissinger, who was certainly not suspected of being particularly China-friendly, stated:

The wei qi player needs to assess not only the pieces on the board but the reinforcements the adversary is in a position to deploy. Chess teaches the Clausewitzian concepts of “center of gravity” and the “decisive point” – the game usually beginning as a struggle for the center of the board. Wei qi teaches the art of strategic encirclement. Where the skillful chess player aims to eliminate his opponent’s pieces in a series of head-on clashes, a talented wei qi player moves into “empty” spaces on the board, gradually mitigating the strategic potential of his opponent’s pieces. Chess produces single-mindedness; wei qi generates strategic flexibility.

A similar contrast exists in the case of China’s distinctive military theory. Its foundations were laid during a period of upheaval, when ruthless struggles between rival kingdoms decimated China’s population. Reacting to this slaughter (and seeking to emerge victorious from it), Chinese thinkers developed strategic thought that placed a premium on victory through psychological advantage and preached the avoidance of direct conflict.⁸

Importantly, this is not simply a qualification of the role of the former hegemon, but — potentially — the beginning of a new global era. In general terms and from a perspective of

⁸ Kissinger, Henry, 2012: On China; London: Penguin: 24 f.

political economy such new era is taking shape along the search for appropriate definitions along the following main lines: conflicts between nation state and globalism, analog and digital domains, traditional class structures and new social obliterations, industrialism and virtualism. The current legal and institutional system does not have the competencies and capacities to address these tensions. We can even say that the given structures are opposing a solution: they are caught in traditional patterns; they had been established as answer to the modern nation states, analog domains, traditional class structures, industrialism — alterations in particular to the economic and the legal system remained within the traditional framework. It is wrong to conclude that the current general trend to use violence as politics offers a solution. On the contrary, we must find institutional and legal structures that are genuinely addressing the issues arising from globalism, digital domains, new social obliterations, and virtualism. In particular China shows new answers to these challenges: a radical approach to the use of new technologies and integration of artificial intelligence in people's everyday lives, the establishment of new infrastructures, the "gradual mitigation of the strategic potential of his opponent's pieces, the generation of strategic flexibility" — to slightly rephrase the Kissinger quote from above. This must be seen as search for global answers to global challenges.

While there are many reasons for optimism — these can be summarised as "Chinese emancipation" and "Taking Global Responsibility" — we must still acknowledge that these are searches. One of the reasons is given by the fact of the so-called multipolarity — in a more precise formulation this is a matter of recognising the existence of different interpretations and realities of societal formations, also a matter competition between different definitions and interpretations of development. Phenomenologically, we are first witnessing a fragmentation. Translated into mathematical terms we are looking for a new minimum common denominator. However, this must not be defined by the one-sided power but by the interest of mankind. Being so broad, such minimum common denominator leaves a wide variety of numerators of the equation of development. With the orientation on *Wealth of the Planet* the traditional orientation on the *Wealth of Nations* is radically qualified and questioned. We can go even a step further, suggesting that the traditional concept of the nation state undergoes a far-reaching changes. Both, weakness of the United Nations, the Federal System of the USA and the European Union on the one hand and the increasing strength of institutions as the BRICS (this is just one example and

many could be added) can be seen as indicators of further erosion of the still prevailing power structures. The current advances and threats from the Trump administration are a clear and alarming indication of this: the frantic thrashing of a wounded animal. It is the constellation of crisis that had been earlier presented by quoting Antonio Gramsci. But it cannot be ignored that this is an extreme, manifesting the often more or less hidden agenda.

A New United Nations?

The economic aspects of the current situation and perspectives are of course decisive but at present this discussion cannot be continued; the information provided earlier must suffice. Instead, here we will concentrate on the role and function of law which is undergoing and must undergo fundamental change.

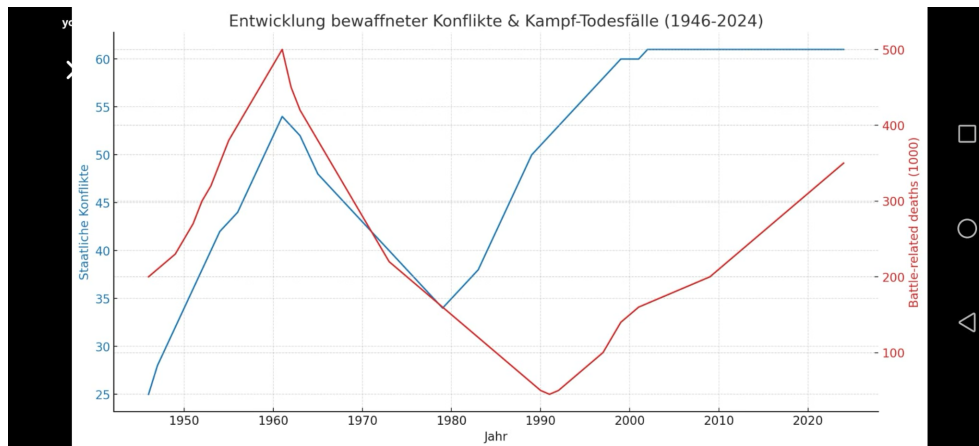
- + Underway is a **substantial reorientation**, highlighting the importance of collective rights, and that means equal rights for various collectivities — this is not a matter of multipolarity but a way of moving away from the arbitrariness of individualism.
- + In conditional and constitutive terms this is connected with a **categorical reorientation** in form of the elaboration of criteria for judgements that move away from
 - + a sole orientation on individuals and
 - + the orientation along the lines of past and presence, considering the future
 - + taken together we arrive at orienting on the future of collectivities and the one collectivity, namely the planet and its inhabitants.
- + As new **procedural reorientation** we must consider restitutive law, including soft policies although they need careful new design.
- + The **institutional reorientation** requires the establishment of forms of governance, replacing and/or complementing traditional government structures.

Dag Hammarskjöld, a former secretary general of the United Nations, stated that

[t]he United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell⁹

⁹ Quoted in Sater, Chadi Abdel, 16:15-2 February 2024 AD 23 - Rajab 1445 AH: International Responsibility to Save Humanity from Hell... Before it's Too Late; in: Asharq Al-Awsat; <https://english.aawsat.com/features/3984801-international-responsibility-save-humanity-hell-its-too-late>; giovedì 25 settembre 2025

The following shows that it is still — and again increasingly — necessary to save humanity from hell — *homo homini lupus est* is still alive.



It is not only the wolf; it is also the danger that UN-institutions are severely under pressure: the weakening of the original financial structure, the fact that at this stage the WHO is financed to 80 percent by private means, coming in particular large foundations. The so-called philanthro-capitalism is nowadays determining to a large extent the WHO's policies; especially worrying is the fact that much of this funding is earmarked and donators as the Gates-foundation, the largest donor, determine what should be done with the money. Technically help and directed to control certain diseases. However, core functions are left behind, namely that

WHO leads global efforts to expand universal health coverage. We direct and coordinate the world's response to health emergencies. And we promote healthier lives – from pregnancy care through old age.¹⁰

Speaking analytically of multipolarity or multi-centred politics would be a case of whitewashing. In fact we are currently confronted with fragmentation. In principle the strategy is not new; it is about *divide et impera* going hand in hand with *controlled delegation*. — On the 15th of January 2026 *The Economist* reminds us:

For much of modern history, multinational enterprises have acted hand in glove with the state. Britain and the Netherlands were bankrolled by their East India companies,

¹⁰ <https://www.who.int/about>; venerdì 26 settembre 2025

and provided military and diplomatic support in return. Germany's Krupp and Japan's Mitsubishi aided industrialisation while their governments secured mines and markets abroad. American interventions helped oil firms secure foreign resources.¹¹

So, the one pillar of the historical development is an inextricable fusion of public and private power for the purpose of safeguarding corporate interests — historical development changes at times the main force, i.e. the instance that dominates the reins. But the basic pattern is not effected by such temporary alteration.

Looking at international relations another topic comes up these days, presuming — without proof — that Russia uses drones as means of provocation.

Towards the end of 2025 a newsletter from *The Economist* published a comment

The age of air power could be said to have begun with the Montgolfier brothers and their first hot-air balloon in 1783. This might seem like the most primitive airborne technology possible, but modern military forces have lately been rediscovering the potential of balloons.¹²

Here we are not interested in the question if drones had been used in the said way or not — at the time, the relevant Danish minister said that there is not any specific information about the background. That means, coming back to Montgolfier brothers and the balloon, that today's balloons can also be flying as fake news, easily produced on any home-computer.

However, while fragmentation is a serious problem the current constellation we can also see the opportunity that the dissolution of the hegemonic position fosters the possibility and even requires a new definition guided by the acceptance of a common denominator on the basis of which concrete definitions, also the processes and mechanism of implementation, must be developed by way of analysing the conditions under which human rights gain specific relevance.

Conclusion

Realistically, it is currently better to speak of a fragmented global order. This means on the one hand that we face the lack of a sufficiently strong move to global coherence; on the

¹¹ <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2026/01/15/americas-gunboat-capitalism-will-make-the-world-poorer>; venerdì 16 gennaio 2026

¹² Greene, Lane, 29.09.2025: The Economist today. The best of our journalism, handpicked each day, email-newsletter

other hand the fragmentation is a clear sign of the weakening of the up to now still dominating Rostowian model of development — the hegemony of the USA is braking away, due its own weakness and due to the success in particular of China. As well realistically, it is not a linear, irreversible process. Important is, however, to recognise three possible pathways:

- one is a revision of the current trend and the revival of the “Western” hegemony
- another is stagnation, i.e. the continued state of a power imbalance, with the balance of power shifting back and forth
- third, and with strong signs pointing into this direction, we can expect the development of a new geopolitical pattern, characterised by common efforts towards a Wealth of the Planet.

There are good reasons for such optimism — if we take existing initiatives and look especially at the four Chinese initiatives:

- Global Development Initiative — Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development (GDI — 2021 — 全球发展倡议：加快落实2030年可持续发展议程，推动实现更加强劲、绿色、健康的全球发展)
- Global Security Initiative (GSI — 2022— 全球安全倡议)
- Global Civilization Initiative (GCI — 2023 — 全球文明倡议) and the
- Global Governance Initiative (GGI — 2025 — 全球治理倡议)

we see (i) that China recognised the challenges we all face and (ii) that current challenges — challenges are recognised as global challenges — are addressed through a coherent strategy.