

**CHINA'S GLOBAL INITIATIVES**

**COMMON SECURITY IN THE SERVICE OF NATIONAL INTEREST**

**Jyrki Kallio**



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### COMMON SECURITY IN THE SERVICE OF NATIONAL INTEREST

- Between 2021 and 2023, China introduced three global initiatives, namely the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. China has also put forward a proposal for the reform and development of global governance.
- Together, they constitute a major goodwill campaign and are presented as examples of China's contribution towards "a global community of shared future", China's slogan envisioning an ideal world.
- At least at the rhetorical level, the initiatives are aimed at cooperation rather than rivalry. China deserves credit for attempting to introduce constructive and positive thinking into international relations. However, the initiatives are closely related to China's core interests, such as maintaining state sovereignty and safeguarding Communist Party rule.
- Expectations about the initiatives can only be low, given the lack of concrete roadmaps and the anti-Chinese sentiments among many of the Western nations.



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## COMMON SECURITY IN THE SERVICE OF NATIONAL INTEREST

### INTRODUCTION

Between 2021 and 2023, China introduced three global initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiative (2022), and the Global Civilization Initiative (2023). In addition, China put forward a Proposal for the Reform and Development of Global Governance (2023). Together, they constitute a major goodwill campaign to convince global audiences that China is committed to making the world a better place, and does not pose a threat. At the same time, the message is particularly directed towards the Global South, where China seeks support amid its worsening relations with the West. This Briefing Paper discusses the content, motivation and purpose of these initiatives and examines their multilayered nature, ranging from an assertive defence of China's political system to constructive deliberations on reforming the global system.

The first initiative is officially called the “Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development Initiative”. As the name implies, the initiative was aimed at revitalizing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which had been stymied by slow economic growth following the Covid-19 pandemic. The concept paper for the initiative<sup>1</sup> lists poverty alleviation, food security, equitable distribution of vaccines, green development, and the digital economy among the priority areas. These should be advanced in a people-centred, inclusive and fair manner, and in synergy with other related agendas and initiatives, such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (a pan-African strategic framework for the socio-economic development of the continent adopted by the African Union in 2002), and in coordination with multilateral processes for common development run by the UN, G20, BRICS and others. The concept paper mentions no concrete steps other than “enhancing” and “strengthening” communication and coordination between the existing mechanisms and actors.

The second initiative, on global security, loftily “aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promote durable peace and development in the world”.<sup>2</sup> The initiative builds on President Xi Jinping's earlier concept of “common security”, calling for respect for the security of every country and a holistic approach combining both traditional security, such as military security, and non-traditional security domains, such as food security or energy security. The concept of common security is further elaborated as a commitment to sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs, abiding by the principles of the UN Charter. Furthermore, the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be taken seriously and disputes should be resolved through dialogue and consultation.

The Global Security Initiative concept paper lists several cooperation priorities, platforms and mechanisms. These include support for the UN and its peace-keeping activities, and supporting various existing regional cooperation mechanisms in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The paper also emphasizes the prohibition of weapons of mass destruction, citing the statement from a meeting between US and Soviet leaders in the 1980s that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”. The paper also calls for building more international platforms and mechanisms to address terrorism, cybersecurity, biosecurity and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. China volunteers to provide training opportunities for professionals in developing countries to address such security issues.

The third initiative on global civilization was included in a speech given by Xi Jinping at a dialogue meeting with world political parties in the spring of 2023 in his capacity as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC).<sup>3</sup> The short speech mainly addressed the

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021) Global Development Initiative – Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development Concept Paper (official English translation). [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI\\_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf).

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (translated by Xinhua). <https://english.news.cn/20230221/75375646823e4060832c760e-00a1ec19/c.html>.

3 Xi Jinping (2023) “Keynote address”. Speech delivered on 15 March 2023, CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting, Beijing (translated by Xinhua). [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/16/content\\_85171478.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/16/content_85171478.htm).

concept of modernization, with Xi stressing the right of every nation and civilization to choose its own path, taking into consideration its own national conditions and unique features. According to Xi, China has chosen neither to tread “the old path of colonization and plunder, nor the crooked path taken by some countries to seek hegemony once they grow strong”. China is ready to share its own governance experience with others.

Xi proposed his Global Civilization Initiative in the spirit of steering the world away from the path towards a new Cold War through inter-civilization exchanges and mutual learning. The idea is centred on the diversity of civilizations and the need to uphold equality and inclusiveness in their relations. Xi also listed the common values of humanity that should be universally advocated: peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom. While these are “common aspirations of all peoples”, countries need to understand that different civilizations perceive these values in different ways, and one civilization should not impose its own values or models on others. Instead, the initiative is aimed at promoting more interaction and better understanding between different civilizations.

Lastly, the “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance”<sup>4</sup> was issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the autumn of 2023. It was timed to coincide with the 10th anniversary of Xi Jinping’s proposal to build “a community with a shared future for humankind”. This “community” (translated more literally as “a community of common destiny for humankind”), *Renlei mingyun gongtongti*, is Xi Jinping’s central foreign policy slogan, aimed at describing how China sees the future of international relations. It is based on the idea that the development of one country is closely intertwined with that of others. It also includes an aspect of collective security, based on the understanding that no country can single-handedly seek absolute security for itself.<sup>5</sup> Since 2012, it has been a stock phrase in China’s foreign relations rhetoric.

In addition to more general calls for multilateralism and for upholding a UN-centred international system, the proposal addresses several geopolitical hotspots, reiterating China’s well-known positions. Regarding Ukraine, for example, the proposal recommends

upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, observing the principles of the UN Charter, and taking the legitimate security concerns of all parties seriously. The last clause is supported by stating that the root cause of the “crisis” lies in problems within European security governance, an obvious reference to NATO enlargement.

According to the proposal, China condemns all forms of terrorism and extremism, and opposes the politicization or instrumentalization of counter-terrorist activities. This may be regarded as a criticism of the US decision<sup>6</sup> in 2006 to define the promotion of democracy as an element of the war against terror. China – itself a medium-sized nuclear-weapon state with a growing arsenal – supports nuclear disarmament in a step-by-step manner, where countries with the largest nuclear arsenals are primarily responsible for disarmament.

The proposal then reiterates points made in the three global initiatives, such as calling for more open and inclusive economic globalization, stressing the importance of addressing climate change, equal-footed exchanges between civilizations, and the right of countries to choose their own path for human rights development. Ultimately, there are no tangible proposals for reforming the system of global governance. China promotes “true multilateralism” and greater democracy in international relations, and supports the core role of the UN in international affairs. The phrase “true multilateralism” is used in many official Chinese documents, often to stress China’s dissatisfaction with the US-led international order, which China presumably considers “unilateral multilateralism”. Regarding the reform of the Security Council, China favours expanding the representation of developing countries, especially from Africa. The proposal does not specify how this could be achieved, however.

## CHINA’S MOTIVATION BEHIND THE INITIATIVES

China’s motivation behind the initiatives is disclosed in a key document entitled “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions”<sup>7</sup> (henceforth “Global Community Proposal”). The document is a white paper published by the State Council Information Office in September 2023.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance (official translation). [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531\\_11367498.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html).

5 Xinhua Institute (2024) Fostering a Global Community of Shared Future: Contemporary Significance and Tangible Achievements. <https://english.news.cn/20240501/b9bcaac43f64ef3bce1630c84f0cbdc/c.html>.

6 US National Security Council (2006) The National Security Strategy. <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2006.pdf>.

7 The State Council Information Office (2023) A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions (official translation). [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202309/26/content\\_WS6512703dc6d0868f4e8dfc37.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202309/26/content_WS6512703dc6d0868f4e8dfc37.html).

China positions itself against hegemony and the kind of “Cold War mindset” that fuels belief in the Thucydides Trap: namely that a rising power will inevitably seek hegemony. In contrast, China claims that its aim is to promote justice and democracy in international relations.

This is closely linked with China’s accusations that globalization is plagued by unilateralism and protectionism, and that isolationism is giving rise to alliance-based confrontations. China calls for countries to uphold multilateralism and seek partnerships rather than alliances. The Global Community Proposal explicitly mentions some countries’ efforts to decouple from China, as well as “de-sinicization” (in the Chinese version, *qu Zhongguo hua*, “ridding themselves of China”) as risks to stability and development.

The Global Community Proposal mentions democracy and human rights several times, but simultaneously calls for recognition of the existence of different social systems, ideologies, histories and cultures. According to the document, there is no single model of democracy that is universally applicable, and the narrative of “democracy versus authoritarianism” is a false one. In practice, China may call its authoritarian rule a “democracy” if it so desires. The Global Community Proposal goes on to explain that China condemns the notion that one civilization is superior to others, or that a single development path is universally applicable. China denies the existence of universal values and advocates seeking common ground and promoting shared interests while “reserving differences”.

The Global Community Proposal’s criticism of the belief in “so-called universal values” is somewhat contradicted by its promotion of “the common values of humanity embedded in Chinese civilization”. These common values are the ones listed in Xi Jinping’s above-mentioned speech in the spring of 2023. Whether they are all deeply rooted in Chinese civilization is debatable. Indeed, the best elements of traditional Chinese culture are said to include harmony, the spirit of communality, benevolence and goodwill, consideration and reciprocity, and unity of humankind and nature. Harmony refers to both peaceful coexistence and “agreeing to disagree”.

The Global Community Proposal takes pride in China’s lack of “any record of colonization or aggression against other countries”. Of course, such a claim is highly questionable. Even if the fate of Xinjiang and Tibet since China’s late imperial era may be regarded as not constituting colonization, imperial China’s policies towards Korea and Vietnam were expansionist

and had many characteristics of imperialism. As for aggression, China’s punitive attack on Vietnam in 1979 is a comparatively recent example.

China also stresses the importance of the international rule of law, which it equates with the United Nations Charter. The Global Community Proposal explicitly denies that China is seeking to dismantle or restart the international system afresh. The document underlines the importance of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia in establishing the principles of equity and sovereignty. In addition to territorial integrity and respect for each country’s core interests, these principles are of paramount importance to China. Similarly omnipresent in Chinese rhetoric on international relations is “non-interference in states’ internal affairs”, which can be regarded as the core of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, initially formulated in the 1950s to guide Sino-Indian relations. It is no surprise that the Five Principles are also mentioned several times in the Global Community Proposal.

The Global Community Proposal also touches on the “softer” themes mentioned in the three initiatives. For example, it calls for reducing inequality in global development. The document is also very “green”, stressing the need to care for nature instead of placing humans above it. The final part of the document lists China’s concrete contributions to building a global community of shared future, which include the Belt and Road projects, hosting various international meetings, and participating in multilateral frameworks such as the UN and BRICS.

## THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE VALUES BEHIND THE INITIATIVES

With regard to the “common values of humanity embedded in Chinese civilization” mentioned in the Global Community Proposal, it is perhaps illuminating to see how these values have been identified and analysed by Chinese scholars. A search of the large Chinese academic journal article database CNKI reveals three short articles discussing the legacy of China’s traditional culture in relation to the global community of shared future in some detail.<sup>8</sup> The three authors, Li Xiang, Li Yanan and Wang Jianfei, endeavour to put flesh on the bones of “the best of traditional Chinese culture” listed in the Global Community Proposal by looking at the original Chinese formulations expressed

<sup>8</sup> The author wishes to express his gratitude to Leena Hoppula, a trainee at FIIA during the summer of 2024, for her valuable assistance here.

in the traditional manner of four-character (four-syllable) phrases. In doing so, the articles largely follow the same logic and argumentation.<sup>9</sup>

Confucianism, as the epitome of Chinese tradition, is commonly said to emphasize that the world – all under Heaven (*Tianxia*) – is to be shared by everyone (*Tianxia wei gong*). Li Y. implies that this calls for renouncing hegemony and commercial protectionism, racism, and the capitalist plundering of wealth. As both Li X. and Wang attest, Confucianism has traditionally regarded the pursuit of profit and benefits as the opposite of maintaining righteousness (*zhong yi qing li*). However, development and progress are driven by deriving benefits. Therefore, as Li X. emphasizes, building a global community for a shared future should be based on a modern view of

striking a balance between what is profitable and what is right (*yi li jian gu*). One should not neglect righteousness for the sake of profit, and profit should be pursued with the benefit of the whole world in mind.

On the topic of international relations, Li Y. and Wang identify concord among all states (*xiehe wan bang*) as the goal expressed in Chinese tradition. This is related to the conviction, expressed by the prominent Confucian thinker Zhang Zai (1021–1077), that all people originate from a similar womb and all creatures are our companions (*min bao wu yu*). From these ideals, it follows that the building of a global community calls for deepened international cooperation based on mutual benefit and a win-win mindset.

All three authors discuss the necessity of achieving harmony both in human relations and in the relationship between humans and nature. A Confucian maxim states that one should cherish concordance but not conformity (*he er bu tong*), referring to the need to reach consensus among political advisors on the one hand,

9 Li Xiang (2024) “Shilun Renlei mingyun gongtongti linian dui Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua de chuancheng yu chaoyue”, *Zhongguo jun zhuan min* 9/2024: 44–46. Li Yanan (2023) “Renlei mingyun gongtongti sixiang de Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua genyuan tansuo”, *Shiji Qiao* 12/2023 (no. 388): 70–72. Wang Jianfei (2021) “Renlei mingyun gongtongti linian xia de Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua tan yuan”, *Anyang Gongxueyuan Xuebao* vol. 22 no. 6 (126): 5–8.

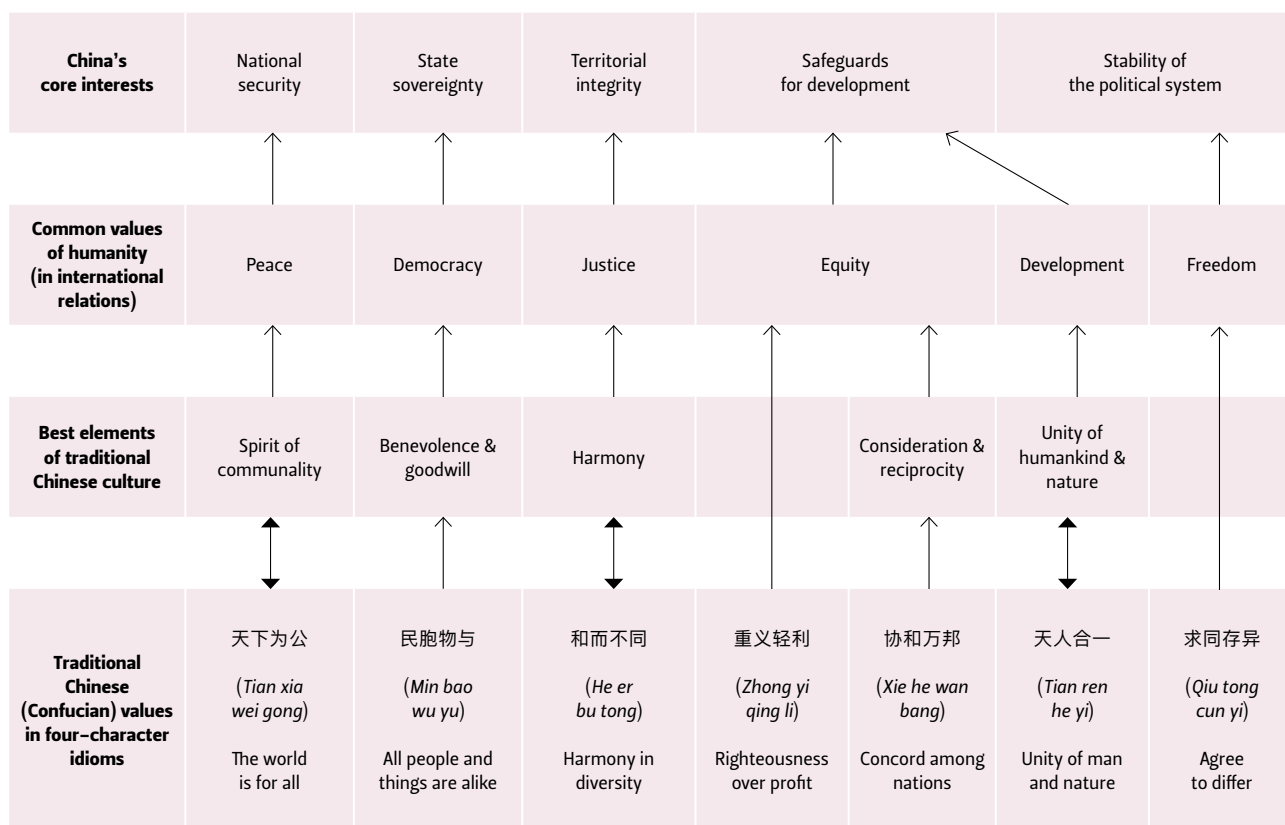


Figure 1. Tentative illustration of how China might interpret the relationships between Chinese traditional culture (as values expressed in four-character idioms and identified by the Chinese scholars mentioned in this paper), common values of humanity (as listed by Xi Jinping), and China's core interests.

Peace is the best guarantee of national security; the sovereign equality of all states requires democracy in international relations; breaches of territorial integrity are unjust; equity provides a level playing field for development for all countries; sustainable development requires an understanding of the oneness of humankind and nature; and freedom to choose one's own political system brings stability.

Peace grows out of a spirit of communality; democracy among nations requires cooperation in good faith and the recognition that all people are fundamentally the same; justice is the outward expression of harmony; equity requires a harmonious balance between what is profitable and what is right, and can only be achieved through consideration of the needs of others; and freedom means that all international actors have the right to their opinions.

and the dangers of “yes men” around the ruler on the other. In today’s world, societal interactions should be kept harmonious while respecting the right of individuals to hold their own opinions. A similar idea is reflected in China’s affinity for cultural relativism, expressed using another ancient maxim and mentioned by Li X.: “to seek common ground while reserving differences” (*qiu tong cun yi*). In practice, the maxim is often mentioned in policy texts that emphasize China’s desire to interpret international norms from its own perspective.

Harmony between humans and nature – or “oneness of Man and Heaven” (*Tian ren heyi*) – has been emphasized by Daoist and Confucian thinkers alike. Wang presents this maxim as an example of Chinese thinking that contradicts the harmful dichotomization of humans and nature that can be seen as a driving force of Western capitalism. Following his logic, this “oneness” also forms the view of nature behind the building of a global community. Xi Jinping has mentioned this view in his speeches, together with another ancient maxim originating in Daoist classics: *Dao fa ziran*, usually (but arguably mistakenly) understood to mean “the Way models itself after nature”.

All in all, the authors mentioned above content themselves with repeating the traditional values mentioned in Xi Jinping’s speeches, without trying to analyse their historical or philosophical content, or attempting to make a direct connection between these values and “the common values of humanity”, although some associations could surely be found. One prominent Chinese scholar, however, has made an observation which tellingly implies that China’s calls for democracy, freedom and justice only concern international relations – where China sees them as lacking – as if the values were merely instrumental and lacked any intrinsic meaning.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional values mentioned above have been drawn mainly from Confucian and Daoist classics, in line with the current regime’s attempt to fill an ideological vacuum of sorts, resulting from the growing discrepancy between Marxist ideals and capitalist realities, by complementing socialist values with selected traditional values.<sup>11</sup> It has the added value of fostering patriotic sentiments among the population, which helps in combatting “peaceful evolution”, namely attempts to change China through the infiltration of Western values.

The Chinese intellectual and philosophical tradition is vast, and choosing another set of values could

portray a different picture regarding China’s inherent peacefulness, for example. This does not mean that the values mentioned above are any less “true”, but it is worth noting that they have been implemented and interpreted with varying degrees of diligence over the centuries. In any case, these are the traditional values that the Chinese leadership claims to follow. This would justify invoking them if China’s actions were to deviate from the ideals present in the values.

## CONCLUSIONS

The document “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions” reveals China’s foreign policy goals, which have remained the same for decades. Most importantly, they have been geared towards fulfilling the Chinese Dream, defined as the Grand Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, the slogan outlining China’s future goals announced by Xi Jinping at the beginning of his first leadership term in 2012. It is also seen as crucial for safeguarding China’s political system under the leadership of the CPC. Furthering these goals requires a secure, prosperous and predictable international environment, which is why China stresses the importance of globalization and economic cooperation.

During the Xi Jinping era, China’s foreign policy goals have evolved into a list of ten priorities. These include:

- Safeguarding the Party leadership
- Promoting great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, aimed at realizing the Grand Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation
- Upholding world peace by advancing the building of a community of shared future (or common destiny)
- Upholding strategic self-confidence based on Socialism with Chinese characteristics
- Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative in a mutually advantageous manner
- Upholding peaceful development with mutual respect and a win-win principle
- Deepening diplomatic efforts to create global companionships
- Upholding principles of equality and justice in reforming global governance
- Safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and the benefits of development by upholding the bottom line of core interests
- Creating a uniquely Chinese style of diplomacy

10 Chen Lai (2024) “Ruxue jiazhi yu renlei gongtong jiazhi”. Keynote presentation delivered on 20 October 2024, Conference of the International Confucian Association, Beijing.

11 See Kallio, Jyrki (2011) “Tradition in Chinese Politics”. *FIIA Report 27*, 2/2011: 13.

These foreign policy priorities are closely aligned with China's core interests. According to the 2011 White Paper on Peaceful Development, China's core interests include "state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development". These form the "red lines" that China will not tolerate being crossed. When the global initiatives talk about taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, this is what they are actually referring to.

On the one hand, the global initiatives, including the proposal to reform global governance, can be seen as efforts to create an international environment conducive to the realization of China's goals. In other words, they are simply reaffirming China's core interests. On the other hand, it is fair to say that the initiatives are predominantly constructive and aimed at cooperation rather than rivalry. At face value, at least, they represent positive thinking about international relations, a field that is discouragingly often seen only through the lens of contention and conflict.

This is a major qualitative difference between China and Russia. While China shares with Russia a pronounced opposition to Western "hegemonism", China also pledges its commitment to peaceful coexistence. This stands in stark contrast to Russian propaganda and rhetoric, which have become increasingly militaristic and belligerent.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, needing economic

growth, China favours international cooperation and continued globalization, whereas Russia has demonstrated a willingness to cut itself off from the global community entirely.

It would therefore be short-sighted to write off the global initiatives as mere CPC propaganda. The world simply cannot continue on its current trajectory towards more wars and looming global catastrophes. Hence, it could be argued that China's good intentions deserve the benefit of the doubt. Nevertheless, despite a real need for better global governance truly driven by the pursuit of the common good, the initiatives – whether taken at face value or not – seem to have been relegated to the level of wishful thinking, at least for the time being. There are two main reasons for this.

First, China has not presented a feasible roadmap for advancing its initiatives. The Global Community Proposal lists actions and contributions, but it lacks concrete content and examples. Second, in today's political atmosphere, "de-sinicization" is a reality in the so-called Western world. With the West's attention focused on China's unfair trading practices and suspicions of industrial espionage, and with all Chinese actors portrayed as potential security risks, China faces an almost insurmountable uphill struggle in convincing Western audiences of its goodwill, both in the political domain as well as at the grassroots level. In the long run, this is unfortunate. After all, China needs globalization, and the globalized world needs China. /

<sup>12</sup> Lassila, Jussi (2024) "Russia's wartime ideology". *FIIA Briefing Paper 394*, 9/2024. [https://www.fia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/bp394\\_russias-wartime-ideology.pdf](https://www.fia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/bp394_russias-wartime-ideology.pdf).