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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Security provider meets security seekers: Explaining the support for China's Global Security Initiative through role alignment

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Abstract
China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), launched in 2022, has rapidly turned into a flagship programme through which Beijing seeks to present itself as an international security actor and foster strategic alignment both within and beyond its immediate neighbourhood. While emerging scholarship mostly discusses China's intentions behind the GSI, this article places emphasis on analysing how the initiative has been received. In particular, we seek to investigate why a large number of states from the global south have endorsed the GSI by not only lending rhetorical support to the initiative but also increasingly moving to implement specific security-related cooperation projects with China. We take a role-theoretical approach and make the argument that growing role alignment between China and its GSI partners best explains this development. That is, China's emerging role conception as an international security provider – particularly in non-military domains such as law enforcement, police training, and IT surveillance – resonates with the expectations and needs of many global south states as security seekers, which tend to share similar understandings of security with China and often prioritise internal and regime security. To validate our argument empirically, we provide empirical examples from continental Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and (East) Africa.

Keywords: China; Global Security Initiative; global south; role alignment; role theory

Introduction

When Chinese President Xi Jinping took the stage at the Boao Forum in April 2022 to unveil the Global Security Initiative (GSI), he did so at a moment of profound geopolitical uncertainty. The Ukraine war had just begun to challenge key assumptions of the post–Cold War security order, while the rivalry between the United States and China was escalating across nearly every domain. At the same time, a series of overlapping crises – from conflicts in the Middle East to mounting tensions in the Indo-Pacific – contributed to a broader sense of geopolitical fragmentation and uncertainty in the international system. In this context, many states in the so-called global south have been recalibrating their foreign policies in response to what has been interpreted as the growing polarisation of the international system.[1] In this environment, many governments in the global south have sought to preserve strategic autonomy by actively diversifying their partnerships and

[1]For example, Sebastian Biba, 'Alignment in times of United States–China great-power rivalry: How the search for "like-minded" partners promotes bloc building', *International Relations*, online first (2025), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178251381163}.

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engaging simultaneously with multiple major powers. Against this backdrop, the GSI has emerged as not simply a new slogan in Chinese diplomacy but also a flagship programme through which Beijing seeks to present itself as an international security actor and foster strategic alignment both within and beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

While Western observers have often dismissed the initiative as vague and largely rhetorical,[2] its international uptake tells a different story. Semi-official Chinese sources have reported that by 2024, 119 countries and international organisations had expressed 'support and appreciation' for the GSI, with references to it incorporated into 123 bilateral and multilateral political documents.[3] More importantly, practical cooperation projects linked to the initiative have also multiplied, suggesting that it is steadily transitioning from words to action.[4] This development poses an intriguing question: in an era marked by intensifying great-power rivalry and growing polarisation, in which many states seek to maintain strategic flexibility rather than align too closely with either Washington or Beijing, how can the growing endorsement of China's GSI be explained? Why are many governments not only expressing rhetorical support for the GSI but also exploring opportunities to implement practical cooperation projects with China under the banner of the initiative?

To answer these questions, this article makes use of *role theory*. Unlike rationalist theories of international relations (IR), role theory captures the important intersubjective dimensions of international politics by examining how states define their own roles – understood as social positions[5] – and how these roles are aligned with and recognised by others. Our main argument is that the increasing endorsement of the GSI can best be explained through growing *role alignment* between China and many countries from the global south. Role alignment generally refers to a process through which actors' role conceptions as well as their role expectations become increasingly compatible, thereby enabling cooperation. Specifically, we argue that China's emerging role conception as a nascent international security provider[6] – particularly in non-military domains such as law enforcement, police training, and IT surveillance – resonates with the expectations and needs of many global south governments, which act as security seekers and tend to share similar understandings of security with China, particularly regarding the prioritisation of internal and regime security. Crucially, because GSI-related cooperation is largely non-military in nature and can therefore be seen as supplementary to the US military-focused approach, it allows participating states to enhance their security partnerships with China without having to make stark geopolitical choices. In fact, partnering with China's GSI enables these countries, to some extent, to more actively navigate a more competitive international environment by selectively engaging with Chinese security initiatives while maintaining security partnerships with other major powers as well.

[2]M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two: A journey, not a destination', *China Leadership Monitor* (1 June 2024), available at: {https://www.prcleader.org/post/china-s-global-security-initiative-at-two-a-journey-not-a-destination}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[3]Gao Fei, 'Yi Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao tuidong goujian xinxing guoji guanxi' [Using major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics to build a new type of international relations], *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], available at: {https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/pc/content/202506/24/content_30081571.html}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[4]Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Isaac B. Kardon, and Cameron Waltz, 'A new world cop on the beat? China's internal security outreach under the Global Security Initiative', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (6 August 2025), available at: {https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/a-new-world-cop-on-the-beat-chinas-internal-security-outreach-under-the-global-security-initiative?lang=en}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[5]Sebastian Harnisch, 'Role theory: Operationalization of key concepts', in Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (eds), *Role Theory in International Relations* (Routledge, 2011), pp. 7–15.

[6]We define the role of a security provider as being based on the provision of security-related resources, capabilities, and cooperation mechanisms (see also below). Importantly, we distinguish this role from other security roles, especially those of security guarantor and security stabiliser (conflict manager). Obviously, China has so far refrained from becoming a security guarantor – not offering security assurances even to its closest partners, such as Venezuela and Iran. While China has also attempted to act as a security stabiliser under the GSI – for example, through conflict mediation efforts such as the now largely obsolete Iran–Saudi Arabia normalisation deal from March 2023 – we argue that such a role follows a different logic and therefore necessitates separate analysis. In this article, we solely focus on China as a security provider.

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To demonstrate the growing support for China's GSI, the article focuses on empirical examples from three different (sub)regions: (1) continental Southeast Asia, where China has sought to promote GSI support and implementation through the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism; (2) Central Asia, where Beijing has relied on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as the more recent China–Central Asia (C + C5) summit as vehicles to advance the GSI; and (3) Africa, where China has employed the well-established Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and formats such as the newly established China–East Africa Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation as platforms for rolling out and implementing the GSI. We select examples from these three (sub)regions not so much because we think they are necessarily representative of GSI reception in the global south more broadly but rather because these (sub)regions are particularly vital to China's foreign and security policy-making and have therefore also witnessed a relatively higher degree of GSI-related interaction and institution building to date. In the case of Central Asia and continental Southeast Asia, this situation already stems from the fact that they are located in China's direct neighbourhood, which creates strong interest on the part of the Chinese leadership in contributing to stability and security in these adjacent countries. Africa is not in China's immediate neighbourhood, but compared to other, more distant regions such as the Middle East, South America, and the South Pacific, China has long-standing institutional ties there, as well as a large number of infrastructure projects and investments. Hence, we can expect a similar Chinese interest in stability and security in the region. In terms of materials, the article draws on a range of official documents as well as policy reports and news coverage that can be linked to either our examples or the GSI more broadly. Given that the implementation of the GSI is still at an early stage, a fully systematic analysis is currently difficult. Instead, our analysis uses the above-mentioned sources as narrative evidence that provides insight into the respective role conceptions and role expectations of China and its partner countries.

Given its recent launch, scholarly literature on the GSI – unlike commentary from think-tanks, online platforms, and media outlets – is still nascent. Dian and Menegazzi have recently published one of the first monographs on the topic.[7] In it, the two authors analyse the origins, contents, and likely consequences of the GSI – as well as its 'sibling' initiatives (see below) – and examine how China seeks to present a coherent global vision while positioning itself as a leader beyond its immediate region, particularly in the global south.[8] What Dian's and Menegazzi's book shares with other forthcoming academic works we are aware of is a common focus on China's rationales behind the GSI. In contrast, this article emphasises the receiving end of China's initiative, exploring how it has been received and why. Regarding the why part, we further employ a strictly theory-guided approach that distinguishes our work from the predominantly atheoretic commentary on the GSI so far.

The article will proceed as follows: first, we will set the empirical stage by describing the characteristics of the GSI as well as outlining the reception and implementation of the initiative in our three selected (sub)regions. Next, we will introduce role theory, with particular attention to the concept of role alignment. We will then analyse China's issue-specific role conception as an emerging international security provider, followed by a discussion of how and why this Chinese role aligns with the security-related roles of China's GSI partner countries. Finally, we will conclude with a brief look beyond our empirical examples and present several avenues for future role-theoretical research on China's GSI.

Setting the scene: The GSI, its reception, and implementation to date

The GSI: A brief overview

The GSI forms part of China's proposal for a reformed world order and aligns with its vision of a 'Community of Common Destiny for Mankind'. It is designed to function alongside two other

[7] Matteo Dian and Silvia Menegazzi, *China's Blueprint for Global Leadership: GSI, GDI, GCI and Xi Jinping's Vision for the International Order* (Springer, 2025).

[8] Ibid.

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major Chinese initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Together, these three constitute the 'Three Major Initiatives' launched by Xi Jinping as complementary efforts to reshape the international order. Just recently, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) was added as another pillar.[9]

Generally speaking, the GSI can be understood as an umbrella term or overarching concept that encapsulates the noteworthy increase in China's diplomatic activism on security issues over the past decade. More than four years after its introduction, the initiative remains broad and vague in many respects – arguably by design.[10] A concept paper issued in 2023 nevertheless sought to add some substance to the GSI. In particular, this paper emphasised six 'core concepts and principles': (1) the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; (2) respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (3) abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; (4) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; (5) peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation; and (6) maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.[11]

The concept paper therefore reveals that the GSI covers several traditional mainstays of Chinese foreign policy and also builds on previous Chinese security concepts such as Jiang Zemin's 'New Security Concept' from the mid-1990s. Moreover, and importantly, it is also embedded in Xi Jinping's 'Comprehensive National Security Concept', which mainly focuses on regime security and non-traditional security threats.[12] Consequently, the twenty 'priorities of cooperation' outlined in the concept paper concentrate primarily on issues such as terrorism, transnational organised crime, drug trafficking, public health, biosecurity, food and energy security, and AI and data security. Although traditional security concerns like nuclear proliferation and arms control are also mentioned, they remain secondary.[13] Taken together, the GSI can be interpreted as the international extension of Xi's national security concept, representing an externalisation of China's internal security concerns.[14]

Reception of the GSI

Global reactions to the GSI have varied significantly. Broadly speaking, observers in the Western world have viewed the initiative with considerable reservation, or even outright rejection, whereas commentators from countries in the global south have tended to assess it more positively – even though not without contestation. Western scepticism certainly has its roots in the fact that when Xi introduced the GSI in 2022, its anti-US flavour was all too evident. For example, reflecting long-standing Chinese accusations against the United States, Xi used the launch of the GSI to call on countries to 'reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation'[15]. Not surprisingly, Western – and especially US – responses to the GSI have been predominantly critical.

For instance, the former head of the State Department's Office of China Coordination in the United States, Rick Waters, has criticised the GSI as an undertaking to reshape the rules-based

[9]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Concept Paper on the Global Governance Initiative' (1 September 2025), available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202509/t20250901_11699912.html#::text=Focusing%20on%20a%20subject%20of%20our%20times%2C%20namely,a%20community%20with%20a%20shared%20future%20for%20humanity}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[10]Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two'.

[11]Xinhua, 'Full text: The Global Security Initiative concept paper', Xinhua News Agency (21 February 2023), available at: {https://english.news.cn/20230221/75375646823e4060832c760e00a1ec19/c.html}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[12]David C. Kang, Jackie S. H. Wong, and Zenobia T. Chan, 'What does China want?', *International Security*, 50:1 (2025), pp. 46–81, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.5}.

[13]Xinhua, 'Full text'.

[14]Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac B. Kardon, 'Security without exclusivity: Hybrid alignment under U.S.–China competition', *International Security*, 49:3 (2025), pp. 122–63, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00504}.

[15]Cited in Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two', p. 7.

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international system in China's favour and warned against Chinese strategic revisionism.[16] Similarly, French analyst Alice Ekman has argued that through the GSI, 'China is genuinely striving to build an alternative "security architecture" that would set norms globally, beyond Asia', while also 'aiming at positioning itself as a "model" to emulate (even though it prefers not to use this term for marketing purposes) to governments of the developing world in a diversity of sectors'.[17] Other Western observers have characterised the GSI as an attempt both to 'discredit the United States as a [global] security actor'[18] and to 'spread China's understanding of security abroad'.[19] In addition, by 2024–5, a growing number of Western strategy papers and policy documents began to frame the GSI, alongside the GDI and GCI, as part of a broader Chinese effort to construct parallel governance norms and institutions, rather than merely as rhetorical anti-US signalling. That said, there is also an understanding among some Western commentators that the GSI serves as 'an important PRC foreign policy platform'.[20]

When looking at reactions from countries of the so-called global south, the reception of the GSI appears, on average, relatively more sanguine – though not unequivocally so. That is to say, while many commentators have noted that the core concepts of the GSI 'appeal to developing countries [which tend to] welcome the themes of cooperation, consultation, and non-interference',[21] concerns have also been raised that the GSI could represent a potential 'trap' for countries involved.[22] Generally speaking, there appear to be differences between decision makers and societal elites when it comes to GSI reception in the global south. Whereas – based on official statements – the former often tend to be more positive, the latter seem to be more reserved. These ambiguities in GSI assessment are also evident in the following region-specific analyses.

For Southeast Asia, the State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report – which included academics and researchers, business and finance representatives, civil society and media representatives, government officials, and personnel from regional and international organisations in the ten ASEAN member countries at the time – provides an interesting lens into how the GSI is viewed across the region.[23] In particular, approximately 45 per cent of respondents have either no or only little confidence that the region would benefit from the initiative, while just over 25 per cent express confidence in the GSI. The main reason cited for scepticism is the concern that the GSI could exacerbate tensions between the United States and China and thereby increase pressure on states in the region to take sides. Those who view the initiative more positively particularly argue that the GSI could complement other cooperation platforms and thus contribute to a better balance of power in the region. Based on these survey results, Hoang has maintained that 'the region's overall reaction

[16]Igor Patrick, 'China's development, security initiatives seek to displace Western order, US State Department official says', *South China Morning Post*, available at: {https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3224946/chinas-development-security-initiatives-seek-displace-western-order-us-state-department-official}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[17]Alice Ekman, 'China's Global Security Initiative: When the process matters more than the content', European Union Institute for Security Studies (2023), p. 3, available at: {https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2815/887184}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[18]Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two', p. 1.

[19]William Matthews, 'Security with Chinese characteristics: How the Global Security Initiative reflects Beijing's priorities at home', Lowy Institute (13 May 2025), available at: {https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/security-chinese-characteristics-how-global-security-initiative-reflects-beijing-s}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[20]Carla Freeman, Bates Gill, and Alison McFarland, 'China's lobal Security Initiative takes shape in Southeast and Central Asia', United States Institute of Peace (21 November 2024), available at: {https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/11/chinas-global-security-initiative-takes-shape-southeast-and-central-asia}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[21]Paul Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative', Africa Center for Strategic Studies (4 August 2025), available at: {https://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-china-global-security-initiative/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[22]Abbos Bobokhonov, 'China's Global Security Initiative: Tilting the balance in Central Asia', United States Institute of Peace (7 August 2024), available at: {https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/08/chinas-global-security-initiative-tilting-balance-central-asia}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[23]Sharon Sea et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), available at: {https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf}, accessed 28 March 2026. Also note that in subsequent years, the annual survey reports no longer featured questions on the GSI, which is why we do not have more recent or comparative data.

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to the GSI is rather ambivalent and cautious'. Notably, she has added that '[j]udging by their official statements, mainland Southeast Asian states, except Vietnam, appear to be more accommodating towards the GSI while maritime Southeast Asian states are more cautious'.[24]

The overall picture of ambiguity appears to be broadly similar in Central Asia and Africa, even though comparable polling data for these regions are not available. Summing up the situation in Central Asia, Meena, for example, has argued that the GSI has been 'well-received by Central Asian governments, which seek economic growth and stability'. According to her, 'Beijing's emphasis on respecting sovereignty and promoting development has helped solidify its relationships with Central Asian states. However, challenges such as local resistance to Chinese investments and potential geopolitical tensions with Russia persist.'[25]

Bobokhonov has reached similar conclusions, pointing out that 'Central Asian states have been overwhelmingly receptive of China's increased security engagement'. At the same time, however, he has also cautioned that 'an overreliance on China could lead to increased competition with the U.S. and Russia'.[26] Finally, Herman has summarised the situation in the African context by explaining that

> [f]or African governments, perceived advantages of engaging with the GSI include enhanced access to economic aid, infrastructure financing and affordable, less regulated security equipment. Furthermore, certain leaders share China's emphasis on regime security and continuity, sometimes privileging these over citizen-focused security. On the other hand, certain African commentators highlight the dangers of embracing elements of the GSI that may undermine established norms of democratic civil–military relations […] There are also apprehensions that deeper engagement with the GSI may draw African states into broader geopolitical rivalries, as countering Western influence remains central to GSI narratives and strategy.[27]

It should be added that, particularly among societal actors in Africa, another GSI-related concern is the increasing imports of police and riot equipment, as well as surveillance systems, from China. Nantulya quotes the director of the Public Policy Research Institute of Zimbabwe, who uses the following vivid metaphor: 'Technology is like bees whose mouths have a sting and honey.' Accordingly, Africans 'need to understand the honey we get from China and the sting that digital technologies from China have on Africa, because this has a visible impact on civil liberties'.[28]

Early implementation of the GSI

As already alluded to above, what is striking in these analyses from the global south is the apparent contrast between the usually more positive official views and the more reserved public opinion on the GSI. Against this backdrop, it is all the more noteworthy that, beyond rhetorical 'support and appreciation' for the initiative from foreign governments, there have also been a growing number of tangible cooperation efforts between China and a significant number of global south countries that can be directly linked to the GSI. These cooperation efforts have, as of now, been particularly pronounced in three (sub)regions of concern here – namely, continental Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and (East) Africa.

[24]Thi Ha Hoang, 'Why is China's Global Security Initiative cautiously perceived in Southeast Asia', ISEAS Perspective 2023/11 (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), available at: {https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-11-why-is-chinas-global-security-initiative-cautiously-perceived-in-southeast-asia-by-hoang-thi-ha/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[25]Akanksha Meena, 'China's growing role in Central Asia', E-International Relations (16 February 2025), available at: {https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/16/chinas-growing-role-in-central-asia/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[26]Bobokhonov, 'China's Global Security Initiative'.

[27]Fanie Herman, 'China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and its impact on Africa', LitNet Akademies (1 October 2025), available at: {https://www.litnet.co.za/chinas-global-security-initiative-gsi-and-its-impact-on-africa/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[28]Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative'.

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Beginning with continental Southeast Asia, China's five partner countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam; all ASEAN members) in the Beijing-led LMC have all pledged support for the GSI and made the mechanism a key platform for GSI implementation.[29] In particular, the LMC launched the Lancang–Mekong River Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center (LMLECC) in 2017, which was later incorporated into the GSI framework.[30] As a specific LMC/LMLECC cooperation format well underway for some time, the four riparian countries of China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have conducted regular joint patrols and law enforcement operations on the Mekong river to fight drug-related transnational crime. Following the so-called Mekong massacre in 2011, when thirteen Chinese merchants were killed on the river by a local Burmese drug lord, China realised that it was not able to secure its southern borders alone. A specialised policing unit, the Yunnan Water Corps, was established under the Yunnan Department of Public Security and tasked with leading multilateral law enforcement collaboration with other riparian countries.[31] In September 2024, for instance, the 145th joint patrol lasted four days and included seven vessels and over 130 personnel, with a Chinese ship serving as the operation's command vessel.[32] Moreover, since 2022, the Water Corps has also worked closely with Laotian police and military forces to combat cyber scams in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone on the Lao side of the Mekong river, conducting coordinated raids, sharing intelligence, and facilitating the cross-border transfer of suspects.[33]

In Central Asia, China's main platform for officially advancing the GSI would naturally be the SCO. However, due to India's lack of support for the initiative, China has not yet been able to fully leverage the organisation in this regard. Nonetheless, China has regularly used SCO gatherings to make references to the GSI and proposed related collaboration. For instance, at the 2022 SCO summit, Xi offered to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel and assist with counterterrorism cooperation, both hallmarks of GSI. At the most recent 2025 SCO summit in Tianjin, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted the installation of four new SCO security centres within the scope of the GSI, namely, the SCO Universal Center for Countering Security Challenges and Threats, the Information Security Center, the Center for Combatting Transnational Organized Crime, and the Anti-Drug Center.[34] Moreover – and in contrast to the SCO – China has secured *official* support for the GSI in the C + C5 mechanism, established in 2023 and representing the first multilateral platform between China and Central Asian states that excludes Russia. The inaugural summit declaration further emphasised cooperation in cyberspace, aiming to jointly implement the C + C5 Data Security Cooperation Initiative.[35] Enthusiasm for such an initiative is closely tied to domestic political incentives, as Central Asian regimes view GSI-branded cooperation as a means of bolstering authoritarian resilience through enhanced policing, surveillance, and internal

[29]Greitens, Kardon, and Waltz, 'A new world cop on the beat?'

[30]Qu Bingxu and Zhao Yu, 'Zhoubian waijiao fangzhen zhiyin xia Lancang Jiang & Meigong He zonghe zhifa Anquan hezuo zhongxin de jianshe yu zhanwang' [Establishment and prospects of the Lancang–Mekong River Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center under the guidance of neighbourhood diplomacy], *Shanxi Police College Journal*, 32:1 (2024), available at: {https://cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2024&filename=JGSX202401004&uniplatform=OVERSEA&v=aB8asm13yHHrJAQvrHPUg3cpGLSqLC9PqtnfxwI8eGmfFp0HG9IS-jeu7k9bRhT}, accessed 28 March 2026, pp. 30–35.

[31]Cansong Li and Xiaobo Su, 'Nontraditional security challenges and the geopolitics of transnational security cooperation in the Mekong region', *Geopolitics*, online first (2026), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2026.2626265}.

[32]Greitens, Kardon, and Waltz, 'A new world dop on the beat?'

[33]Li and Su, 'Nontraditional security challenges and the geopolitics of transnational security cooperation in the Mekong region'.

[34]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi introduces eight major outcomes of the SCO Tianjin summit' (1 September 2025), available at: {https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202509/t20250903_11701370.html}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[35]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Zhongguo – Zhongya fenghui Xi'an xuanyan' [China–Central Asia summit Xi'an declaration] (19 May 2023), available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202305/t20230519_11080194.shtml}, accessed 28 March 2026.

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security capacities. However, China's security approach towards Central Asia is actually more multifaceted, as the second C + C5 summit, held in Kazakhstan in June 2025, demonstrates. China and its partners announced the establishment of three regional cooperation centres focused on poverty reduction, educational exchange, and desertification control. According to Sharifli, 'the centers offer a soft security dimension – tackling the root causes of instability such as poverty, environmental degradation, and youth unemployment'.[36] Given the strong official endorsement by all member countries, Fravel has maintained that the C + C5 can even be understood as China's 'greatest success in using an Asian regional organization to promote the GSI'.[37]

Lastly, with regard to the African continent, FOCAC indicated in a joint statement in August 2022 that its African members welcome the GSI.[38] At the 2024 FOCAC summit, Xi had announced that China would train 1,000 police officers, provide police equipment assistance, and create a 'demonstration zone' of GSI cooperation for Africa.[39] Unsurprisingly, the GSI and related security cooperation also feature prominently in the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025–7). In particular, the plan highlights China's offer to host defence and security training programmes for interested African countries in order to strengthen their security governance. It is also noteworthy that, in addition to law enforcement and police cooperation, military grants and the training of military personnel are mentioned in connection with the GSI.[40] Moreover, new security institutions have been established in the GSI context. Most importantly, in September 2024, Chinese Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong convened the first China–East Africa Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation, envisioned as a recurring platform on law enforcement security with the region. This new platform involved the fourteen member states of the East African Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization (EAPPCO). The Chinese side has pledged to work with the EAPPCO and its members to jointly enhance capacity building and personnel exchanges.[41] In November 2025, the second China–EAPPCO ministerial dialogue took place in Kigali, Rwanda. According to the Rwandan readout of the meeting, the dialogue brought together ministers responsible for police affairs and police chiefs of EAPCCO member states with representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security. The talks focused on capacity development for law enforcement and security agencies within the EAPCCO region as well as enhancing joint efforts to combat transnational organised crimes, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism.[42] In addition, new bilateral law enforcement programmes have emerged and continue to do so, such as the Ethiopia China Law Enforcement Center, established in 2024, and the proposed creation of the Ghana China Police and Law Enforcement Academy. In July 2025, Somali security officials also completed training in China on law enforcement, internal security, and border management under the framework of the GSI. According to a 2023 report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, it is estimated that around forty African countries are already engaged in agreements with China's public security agencies.[43]

Altogether, it becomes clear that the early implementation of the GSI is predominantly focused on non-traditional security cooperation between China and its partners across the three (sub)regions examined. Within this broad field, we can moreover identify recurring focal areas,

[36]Yunis Sharifli, 'Moving beyond infrastructure: Key outcomes from the second China–Central Asia summit', China Global South Project (25 June 2025), available at: {https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/china-central-asia-cooperation-centers-soft-power/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[37]Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two', p. 15.

[38]Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative'.

[39]Greitens and Kardon, 'Security without exclusivity', p. 25.

[40]'Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027)', Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (26 September 2024), available at: {http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/202409/t20240926_11497783.htm}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[41]Paul Nantulya, 'China's policing models make inroads in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies (22 May 2023), available at: {https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-policing-models-make-inroads-in-africa/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[42]Rwandan Ministry of Interior, 'Rwanda hosts the 2nd China–EAPCCO ministerial dialogue', available at: {https://www.mininter.gov.rw/news-detail/rwanda-hosts-the-2nd-china-eapcco-ministerial-dialogue}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[43]Nantulya, 'China's policing models make inroads in Africa'.

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in particular joint law enforcement and police cooperation. While such cooperation is, in official terms, usually aimed at combatting organised crime, terrorism, and so on, it is also important to understand that it is likewise meant to achieve the strengthening of the internal security capacities of China's partners. In the case of joint law enforcement on the Mekong river, for instance, Li and Su explicitly argue that such security arrangements reinforce the sovereignty of China's partners.[44] At the same time, some existing cross-regional differences indicate China's willingness to tailor its approach to specific regional contexts. They also suggest that China's security partners exercise a certain degree of agency. We return to this last point in our analysis below.

Theoretical framework: Role theory and the implications of role alignment

To explain the reception of China's GSI, we employ role theory, which has emerged as a powerful analytical lens in IR and foreign policy analysis. Central to our line of reasoning is the concept of *role alignment* – the process through which the role conceptions of different states become compatible, thereby creating conditions for cooperation. By focusing on role alignment, we can examine how China's emerging role as an international security provider resonates with the security-related needs and expectations of its partner countries. This, in turn, helps to explain both the rhetorical support for the GSI and the emergence of concrete cooperation projects.

Roles refer to 'patterns of expected appropriate behavior', grounded in both self-conceptions and the perceptions of others.[45] While role theory has its origins in sociology and social psychology, Holsti was among the first to introduce the concept into IR by linking national role conceptions to foreign policy behaviour. He emphasised that states act based on meanings derived from how they conceive of themselves and others in the international system.[46] Building on Holsti's foundational work, subsequent scholarship has highlighted that states' roles can only be fully understood by incorporating both *ego* and *alter* dimensions. Contemporary role-theoretical approaches generally identify three core elements in the analysis of states' roles.[47] The first element is *internal role conceptions*, that is, an actor's self-perception, its ideas about its place in the international system, and its conceptions of appropriate behaviour – all shaped by its domestic values, culture, and historical legacies. The second element refers to *external role expectations*, namely, the explicit and implicit demands or prescriptions of other states, as well as structural features of the international system. And, finally, the third element is *role performance*, which denotes the actual foreign policy behaviour of a state, through which role conceptions and external expectations are enacted. From this perspective, foreign policy choices are driven by not fixed preferences, as rational choice approaches assume, but rather roles constituted by the interplay between internal conceptions and external expectations.[48]

[44]Li and Su, 'Nontraditional security challenges and the geopolitics of transnational security cooperation in the Mekong region'.

[45]Rikard Bengtsson and Ole Elgström, 'Conflicting role conceptions? The European Union in global politics', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 93–108, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00157.x}.

[46]K. J. Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly*, 14:3 (1970), pp. 233–309, available at: {https://doi.org/10.2307/3013584}.

[47]Cagla Demirduzen and Cameron G. Thies, 'A role theory approach to grand strategy: Horizontal role contestation and consensus in the case of China', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7:1 (2021), p. ogab018, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab018}; Harnisch, 'Role theory'; Kai He and Stephen Walker, 'Role bargaining strategies for China's peaceful rise', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 8:4 (2015), pp. 371–88, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pov009}; Dirk Nabers, 'Identity and role change in international politics', in Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (eds), *Role Theory in International Relations* (Routledge, 2011), pp. 74–92; Cameron G. Thies and Marijke Breuning, 'Integrating foreign policy analysis and international relations through role theory', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 1–4, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00169.x}; Stephen G. Walker (ed.), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Duke Press Policy Studies. Duke University Press, 1987).

[48]Julia Gurol and Anna Starkmann, 'New partners for the planet? The European Union and China in international climate governance from a role-theoretical perspective', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59:3 (2021), pp. 518–34, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13098}.

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Another central claim of role theory is that states rarely hold a single role. Instead, they often assume multiple roles – sometimes complementary, but often conflicting.[49] Additionally, we can distinguish between meta-roles and context-specific roles. The former are generalised roles based on an actor's material and immaterial power resources, which generate expectations of consistent behaviour across issue areas and over time. In contrast, the latter are more localised and tied to particular policy areas or geographic regions. While meta-roles tend to be persistent, context-specific roles are more flexible and subject to contestation, especially in environments characterised by dense social interaction.[50] Because this article concentrates on the security domain, our analysis places greater emphasis on context-specific roles.

Given that roles, particularly context-specific ones, are not static, an important question also is how and when they evolve. Harnisch has distinguished between incremental *role adaptation*, where strategies and instruments change while the underlying role remains intact, and more profound forms of actual *role change*, which involve the transformation of role conceptions themselves.[51] Relatedly, Wehner has introduced four different mechanisms of role change: role displacement, where one role starts to become central and pushes another one to the periphery; role layering, where the actor adds new traits and dimensions to an existing role; role drifting, in which a role remains the same but the social context and related demands change and render it less relevant; and role conversion, when a latent role in an actor's repertoire is redeployed for new purposes.[52] Additionally, the existing literature has also suggested that *role conflicts* – arising from mismatches between self-conceptions and external expectations, discrepancies between multiple self-conceptions, or role ambiguity – are often key drivers of role change.[53]

That said, we follow recent scholarship in role theory that incorporates an interactionist component into the framework.[54] The central argument – also underpinning our ensuing analysis – is that the interplay between roles and interaction is mutually reinforcing and has significant implications for cooperation.[55] More precisely, it can be expected that when roles among different actors become more compatible, that is, when they align, cooperation is likely to emerge and/or intensify. Conversely, role divergence tends to lead to less cooperation and may even lead to conflict or competition.[56] Consequently, we also argue that role change not only occurs as a result

[49]Marijke Breuning, 'Role theory research in international relations: State of the art and blind spots', in Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (eds), *Role Theory in International Relations* (Routledge, 2011), pp. 16–35.

[50]Sebastian Biba, 'The European Union's place in United States–China strategic competition: How role dynamics drive Brussels towards Washington', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 63:1 (2025), pp. 71–88, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13605}.

[51]Harnisch, 'Role theory'. See also: Gordon M. Friedrichs and Jule Sommer, 'Ontological security crisis and role conception change: The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the European Union's role conceptions', *European Journal of International Relations*, 31:1 (2025), pp. 126–51, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241304533}; Damian Strycharz, 'Role change and Russia's responses to upheavals in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 18:4 (2022), p. orac017, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac017}.

[52]Leslie E. Wehner, 'Gradual change in foreign policy: A role-theoretic approach', *International Studies Perspectives*, online first (2025), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaf007}.

[53]Gurol and Starkmann, 'New partners for the planet?'

[54]See for example: Biba, 'The European Union's place in United States–China strategic competition'; Gurol and Starkmann, 'New partners for the planet?'; Chiung-Chiu Huang, 'Interpreting Vietnam's China policy from the perspective of role theory: Independent role versus interactive role', *International Relations*, 34:4 (2020), pp. 524–43, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820904602}; Kai Oppermann, 'Unpacking altercasting in role theory: The Biden administration's policy of altercasting Germany into a faithful ally role in relations with China', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 20:2 (2024), p. orae003, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae003}; Wehner, 'Gradual change in foreign policy'.

[55]See also: Anna Michalski and Zhongqi Pan, 'Role dynamics in a structured relationship: The EU–China strategic partnership', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:3 (2017), pp. 611–27, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12505}.

[56]Biba, 'The European Union's place in United States–China strategic competition'; Gurol and Starkmann, 'New partners for the planet?'

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of role conflict; the prospect of cooperation arising from role alignment may act as a catalyst as well.

Importantly, cooperation does not require full convergence of role conceptions and expectations; compatibility in some underlying beliefs and norms may be sufficient, but also not very sustainable. Yet it is precisely role theory's potential to move beyond explanations that focus solely on material capabilities and strategic interests that makes it a particularly useful analytical lens for our purposes. Role theory highlights how cooperation is shaped by the interaction between actors' self-ascribed roles and the role expectations of others. In the context of the GSI, this implies that China's efforts to position itself as an international security provider (see details below) will gain traction only where partner countries recognise and accept such a role. Importantly, this alignment involves not only the provision of material capabilities but also compatible understandings of what constitutes security.

China's role as an international security provider

Before delving into China's context-specific role in the security realm as articulated through the GSI, it is worth briefly noting that China's meta role has been difficult to pin down. This is because it features several – and at times contradictory – elements, all of which can, however, be linked to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimation strategies.[57] To date, China's meta role has been variously defined, including as a 'new type of socialist great power', a 'developing great power', a 'civilizational great power', a 'responsible great power', an 'Asian great power', and, more recently, also a 'global power'.[58] Michalski and Pan have suggested portraying China as a 'rising power remembering its past'.[59] This descriptor is particularly useful, as it highlights two fundamental dimensions that are also relevant to the present study: first, as a rising power, China seeks to play an increasingly prominent role in international affairs – albeit still selectively. Second, as a country remembering its past, especially the so-called Century of Humiliation, China has retained a deep sense of (regime) insecurity and remains vigilant towards perceived foreign interference. Both dimensions are clearly reflected in China's context-specific role in the domain of international security.

In this domain, China's issue-specific role can nowadays arguably be best considered as one of a (nascent) international security provider. We understand an international security provider as an actor that contributes to the stability and security of other states or regions by offering resources, capabilities, or cooperation mechanisms – such as military assistance, law enforcement support, intelligence sharing, or capacity building – without extending formal security guarantees. While China has a long-standing record as a security actor within the United Nations – as a permanent member of the Security Council and through active participation in peacekeeping operations – its emergence as a security provider outside this context is a relatively recent trend. It is directly tied to the country's growing security-related activism over the past decade, not least since the launch of the GSI. It also reflects China's heightened ambition to establish itself, as already mentioned, as a rising and, in effect, global power – no longer confined to the economic realm, but increasingly developing a more comprehensive portfolio as an international actor, one that also encompasses security affairs.[60] Consequently, between 2019 and 2023, China was the fourth largest supplier of

[57] Nele Noesselt, 'China's contradictory role(s) in world politics: Decrypting China's North Korea strategy', *Third World Quarterly*, 35:7 (2014), pp. 1307–25, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.926120}.

[58] Pascal Abb, 'From "peaceful rise" to peacebuilder? How evolving Chinese discourses and self-perceptions impact its growing influence in conflict societies', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30:129 (2021), pp. 402–16, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1827353}.

[59] Michalski and Pan, 'Role dynamics in a structured relationship'.

[60] Julia Gurol, 'The role of the EU and China in the security architecture of the Middle East', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 18–34, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1728969}.

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conventional weapons – after the United States, France, and Russia.[61] Yet this fact is usually omitted in the context of the GSI. Although the GSI references traditional security, China has placed particular emphasis on non-military or non-traditional security provision,[62] which it nonetheless views as closely intertwined with traditional security threats.[63] In this regard, China also seeks to distinguish its approach from that of the United States, which has traditionally relied on alliances and military security assistance as the cornerstone of its own role as a global security provider and, importantly, also a security guarantor.

As noted earlier, China has been particularly interested in providing GSI-related assistance with a view to strengthening the political or regime security of its partners. This speaks to the backward-looking aspect of China's generalised international role discussed above. As the CCP remains insecure about its rule – partly due to China's historical encounters with imperialist Western powers and, more recently, the 'unfriendly' normative underpinnings of the Western-led 'rules-based international order' (such as democracy and human rights), it seeks to make the world safe(r) for its own political system.[64] China's emphasis on regime and internal security also aligns closely with its long-standing normative preference for an international order grounded in the primacy of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference. From Beijing's perspective, security cooperation that strengthens domestic stability, law enforcement capacity, and state authority does not challenge the sovereign autonomy of partner countries; rather, it reinforces it.[65] This approach differs from Western security practices that have at times linked security assistance to political conditionality or justified external intervention in the name of humanitarian protection or democracy promotion. By contrast, China presents its security engagement – including police cooperation, surveillance technologies, and law enforcement training – as supporting national sovereignty and regime stability rather than as a vehicle for external political influence.[66] In doing so, Beijing not only externalises elements of its domestic security model but also promotes an alternative understanding of international security cooperation that prioritises state authority, domestic order, and non-intervention.

For these purposes, as all documents published in connection with the GSI – from its first announcement[67] to the 2023 concept paper and beyond – clearly indicate, China is increasingly positioning itself as an international security provider that moves beyond a sole focus on its own internal security and regime stability towards becoming actively engaged in security affairs worldwide. For instance, the 2023 concept paper stresses explicitly that the GSI is supposed to

[61] Jacob Gunter and Helena Legarda, 'China's arms industry is increasingly global, but don't expect it to supplant NATO's counterparts any time soon', MERICS China Global Competition Tracker No. 2 (28 August 2024), available at: {https://merics.org/en/tracker/chinas-arms-industry-increasingly-global-dont-expect-it-supplant-natos-counterparts-any#:~:text=China's%20arms%20exports%20are%20not,a%20small%20number%20of%20countries}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[62] Julia Gurol, *The EU–China Security Paradox: Cooperation against All Odds?* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

[63] Yan Xuetong, 'Shijie yijing diaotou' [The world has turned around], *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue* [*International Political Science*], 2 (2023), pp. III–VI.

[64] Wang Jisi, 'Quanqiu zhengzhi qushi yu wo guo de guojia anquan' [Global political trends and China's national security], *Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 52:5 (2024), pp. 1–6; Yu Tiejun, 'Quanqiu anquan changyi: zongti guojia anquan guan zai guoji anquan lingyu de chengxian he yanzhan' [The Global Security Initiative: The presentation and extension of the comprehensive national security concept in the field of international security], *Lüe Yu Yanjiu* [*Strategy and Research*], 7 (2024), pp. 39–46.

[65] Gurol, *The EU–China Security Paradox*.

[66] Jonna Nyman, 'Towards a global security studies: What can looking at China tell us about the concept of security?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 673–97.

[67] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Luoshi quanqiu Anquan changyi, shouhu shijie heping anning' [Implementing the Global Security Initiative to safeguard world peace and tranquillity], available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202204/t20220424_10672812.shtml}, accessed 28 March 2026.

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> eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance [and] encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era.[68]

In fact, GSI-related official documents, alongside its initial implementation, even signal a discernible shift towards preliminary yet expanding Chinese global leadership ambition in the security realm.[69] China's new white paper on national security, titled 'China's National Security in the New Era' and released in May 2025, further underscores that China no longer conceives security solely in domestic terms; rather, national security is increasingly viewed as intertwined with global security.[70] While the white paper functions as an internal doctrine – articulating a holistic national strategy, enhancing institutional capacity, and ensuring domestic stability – the GSI operationalises that doctrine on the international stage through concept papers, multilateral outreach, and security cooperation platforms such as the Xiangshan Forum and the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum. Together, these instruments embody a 'holistic approach to national security'[71] and demonstrate that China is not only emerging as an international security provider but also seeking to reshape global security norms, challenge exclusive alliances, and propose an alternative, cooperative security paradigm.

Moreover, we can observe some noteworthy evolution in China's context-specific role when compared to 2019, when the 'White Paper on National Defense in the New Era' was issued. That document focused primarily on defence modernisation and military reforms.[72] Meanwhile, the 2025 national security strategy dedicates great attention to the international environment, portraying China as a more responsible power and as the architect of an international community based on the principle of 'common security'.[73] To be sure, this trend must also be interpreted in the context of China's expanding overseas interests, particularly its need to safeguard ever growing foreign investments and the rising number of Chinese nationals working abroad – both evident outcomes of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

It may be no coincidence, therefore, that China's expanding programme of foreign police training represents the most tangible outcome to date of the country's efforts to externalise its domestic security vision, while also serving as the clearest sign of Beijing's emerging role as an international security provider.[74] Chinese internal security agencies are forging new forms of law enforcement and security cooperation with foreign partners, thereby broadening and deepening the scope of China's international security engagement. What is more, the offering of police and internal security assistance is a specific area where China clearly differentiates itself from the US approach. Whereas – as already mentioned – US strengths lie primarily in external defence and military guarantees, China's comparative advantages lie in regime security and internal stability. Framed through the GSI and its focus on domestic stability and internal security, Beijing promotes the narrative that it is a constructive force for global order and public safety. In this sense, China's growing emphasis on police cooperation and internal security assistance can also be interpreted as the international

[68] Xinhua, 'Full text'.

[69] Wang, 'Quanqiu zhengzhi qushi yu wo guo de guojia anquan' [Global political trends and China's national security].

[70] The State Council, 'China releases white paper on national security', The State Council of the People's Republic of China (12 May 2025), available at: {https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202505/12/content_WS6821a417c6d0868f4e8f279b.html}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ministry of National Defense, 'China's national defense in the new era', Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (24 July 2019), available at: {https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[73] Helena Legarda and Katja Drinhausen, 'Greater risks, greater confidence: China's new national security white paper', MERICS – Mercator Institute for China Studies (18 June 2025), available at: {https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-china-security-and-risk-tracker-012025}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[74] Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Isaac B. Kardon, and Cameron Waltz, 'China's foreign police training: A global footprint', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (13 November 2025), available at: {https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/10/chinas-foreign-police-training-a-global-footprint?lang=en}, accessed 28 March 2026.

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extension of a sovereignty-centred security model that prioritises domestic stability over external intervention.

In sum, what stands out is China's emergence as an international security provider, with the GSI serving as a crucial and distinctive manifestation of this development. China's growing context-specific role as an international security provider, meanwhile, can be understood as the result of role layering (see above). While the CCP has always been a security-conscious actor, it has recently revised its conception of security – essentially amalgamating its national and global dimensions – thereby more accurately reflecting its meta role as a rising power with global ambitions.

Role alignment between China and its GSI partners

As mentioned earlier, we seek to explain the increasing – though not universal – endorsement and implementation of the GSI through growing role alignment between China and many countries of the global south. Role alignment, in turn, is expected to promote cooperative behaviour. But how exactly can we conceptualise role alignment in the case at hand, having identified China as an emerging international security provider? We suggest that three conditions are indicative to explain this: first, China as security provider encounters GSI partners that are security seekers; second, China's security offerings correspond to the specific security demands of its GSI partners; and third, China's GSI partners recognise and accept the country's role as security provider, including from an ideational point of view. In the following, we will examine these conditions, using empirical examples from the three (sub)regions outlined above.

Condition no. 1: Security provider meets security seekers

It is important to note that, with a few exceptions (most notably Russia), China's GSI partner countries in the relevant (sub)regional organisations of continental Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and (East) Africa largely consist of so-called small states. Indicators of small-state status vary, ranging from absolute size to resource dependency and relational weakness.[75] Significantly, however, these GSI partner states are unequivocally much smaller than China across all of these metrics.

That said, the key point is that the behavioural tendency of small states is generally to adapt to – rather than dominate – their surroundings, rendering them dependent on a peaceful environment.[76] In fact, it has long been argued in the existing literature that the core difference between small states – and even so-called middle powers – and great powers (such the United States and China) is that the former cannot independently provide for their own security but must do so through their relationships with the great powers.[77] Therefore, in the words of Wivel et al., small states are 'permanent security consumers'.[78]

Yet this does not suggest that small states lack agency vis-à-vis great powers. Indeed, the existing literature has long established the simultaneous coexistence of vulnerability and opportunity associated with small-state size.[79] Using the case of Bangladesh, Plagemann has argued that small states can possess 'intrinsic value' for major powers.[80] As noted above, following the Mekong massacre,

[75]Johannes Plagemann, 'Small states and competing connectivity strategies: What explains Bangladesh's success in relations with Asia's major powers?', *The Pacific Review*, 35:4 (2022), pp. 736–64, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2021.1908410}; Anders Wivel, Alyson J. K. Bailes, and Clive Archer, 'Setting the scene: Small states and international security', in Clive Archer, Alyson J. K. Bailes, and Anders Wivel (eds), *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 3–25.

[76]Plagemann, 'Small states and competing connectivity strategies', p. 739.

[77]Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Unwin Hyman, 1988); Robert Ross, 'Balance of power politics and the rise of China: Accommodation and balancing in East Asia', *Security Studies*, 15:3 (2006), pp. 355–95.

[78]Wivel, Bailes, and Archer, 'Setting the scene', p. 5.

[79]Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff (eds), *Agency, Security and Governance of Small States: A Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2024).

[80]Plagemann, 'Small states and competing connectivity strategies', p. 738.

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China likewise recognised that it needed the cooperation of its small-state neighbours to effectively combat drug-related crime in its borderlands. Similarly, China has long understood that it requires the support of its much smaller Central Asian neighbours to address the so-called three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism in relation to its strategically important Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This constellation has even put Central Asian countries in a position to deploy issue-linkage strategies vis-à-vis China, leading to water agreements over shared transboundary rivers – a rare concession by China.[81]

Nonetheless, a fundamental basis for role alignment exists between China, as an emerging international security provider, and its small-state GSI partners, which typically look to external actors for security provision.

Condition no. 2: China's offerings meet its partners' demands

It is noteworthy that an exclusive focus on military threats is usually too narrow to capture the security agendas of small states. Moreover, small states' security challenges rarely emanate from the systemic level; rather, they typically arise in these states' immediate geopolitical surroundings or are domestic in nature.[82] As a result, small states may seek various kinds of security cooperation, potentially from different security providers. This fits with a new global dynamic that Greitens and Kardon have observed and termed 'security hybridization'.[83] It refers to an emerging state of affairs in which the two pre-eminent powers of the day offer divergent types of security assistance. As already noted above, the United States primarily provides regional security assistance that enhances its partners' capabilities to deter or deny external threats to their territory. China primarily offers regime security – that is, assistance that builds its partners' capabilities to control their territory and populations and, often, to prevent threats to a regime's hold on power. Many countries benefit from both types of assistance and therefore actively seek to diversify their security portfolio – also because neither the United States nor China is good at providing the type of security cooperation in which the other excels.[84]

However, this trend of security hybridisation – or security diffusion more broadly – is not unique to the US–China context. In Central Asia, for example, where China's GSI has made inroads through the C + C5 mechanism in particular, Russia remains a key traditional security provider through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and its strong bilateral military ties with regional countries. In East Africa, several EU member states and Gulf countries play an active role in anti-piracy and broader maritime security initiatives, while Chinese private security companies – providing services that range from maritime protection to close personal security – are in high demand as well.[85]

Apparently, China's security assistance often fills a broader void in its GSI partners' security-seeking strategies – needs that are not addressed, or are underemphasised, by other security providers. In continental Southeast Asia, for instance, China's distinctive efforts to expand foreign police training and joint law enforcement align closely with the needs of countries in the region, which grapple with transnational criminal activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and, most recently, online scam operations. As mentioned above, under the umbrella of the LMC/LMLECC, China together with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand now conduct regular joint river patrols, primarily targeting fraud and drug-related activities.[86] While the United States has in

[81] Sebastian Biba, 'China cooperates with Central Asia over shared rivers', Dialogue Earth (24 February 2014), available at: {https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/6741-china-cooperates-with-central-asia-over-shared-rivers/}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[82] Wivel, Bailes, and Archer, 'Setting the scene'.

[83] Greitens and Kardon, 'Security without exclusivity', p. 122.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Alessandro Arduino, 'China's expanding security footprint in Africa: From arms transfers to military cooperation', Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) (2024), available at: {https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-expanding-security-footprint-in-africa-from-arms-transfers-to-military-cooperation-184841}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[86] Greitens, Kardon, and Waltz, 'A new world cop on the beat?'

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the past also provided security equipment to continental Southeast Asian countries – such as the October 2023 handover of twelve patrol boats to Thailand's Marine Police Division for operations on the Mekong river to combat drug and contraband smuggling as well as transborder crime[87] – it is China that puts such equipment to active collaborative use with its neighbouring countries through joint patrols on the Mekong river. Consequently, as Li and Su also argue in this specific context, '[b]y initiating and institutionalising patrols, China is filling a governance gap – a move that both provides a public (security) good and enhances its influence in the subregion, positioning itself as an *indispensable security provider*'.[88]

What further helps China fill specific security niches is that its GSI partner countries tend to have high domestic security needs, since – just like in our three (sub)regions – they are usually either autocracies or weak, maybe also backsliding, democracies. Cooperation with China on issues including law enforcement, police training, IT surveillance, and so on is thus often very much in the interest of these countries' governments, as they consider it conducive to bolstering their internal and regime security apparatus. The result is that China's specific security offerings through the GSI can indeed be seen as supplementary to that of other and more traditional security providers. Nantulya supports this assessment for the African context, noting that 'governments regard the GSI as an *additional* source of security assistance in a resource constrained environment'.[89]

Condition no. 3: GSI partners' recognition and acceptance of China's security role

Another prominent feature of small-state behaviour – and one that once again demonstrates these actors' agency – is the tendency to pursue hedging strategies, that is, to engage with multiple major powers rather than fully align with a single one, in order to preserve some autonomy.[90] Adding to this in the present case is that the great majority of China's GSI partners are geographically located in the global south. Many of these countries – including those in continental Southeast Asia and (East) Africa – share a history as members of the non-aligned movement, which dates back to the Cold War era and further underscores their persistent hedging reflex. In Central Asia, where today's sovereign states were still part of the former USSR during this period, countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have since their independence pursued a similar approach that has been termed 'multi-vector politics'.[91] Against this backdrop, it is beneficial to China that, according to Greitens et al., the country's approach as manifest in the GSI

> does not produce symmetrical, head-to-head competition with Western-led international security order, which is most developed in the military domain. Instead, Beijing is creating China-centered alternative institutions and mechanisms in areas of global security where existing order is weak.[92]

Put differently, despite arguments that support for China's GSI may ultimately have significant implications for partner countries' domestic security norms and practices, while also drawing them closer to China in its geostrategic competition with the West,[93] China does not directly leverage its GSI partners to take sides in the US–China great-power rivalry. In fact, when looking at Southeast Asian countries, for example, we can observe a strategic diversification of security and defence

[87] Chakkrapan Natanri, 'US hands over 12 patrol boats to Thai marine police', *Bangkok Post* (27 October 2023), available at: {https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2672884/us-hands-over-12-patrol-boats-to-thai-marine-police}, accessed 28 March 2026.

[88] Li and Su, 'Nontraditional security challenges and the geopolitics of transnational security cooperation in the Mekong region', p. 13. Italics added.

[89] Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative'. Italics added.

[90] Plagemann, 'Small states and competing connectivity strategies', p. 740.

[91] Reuel R. Hanks, '"Multi-vector politics" and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a f player in Central Asia', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 11:3 (2009), pp. 257–67, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903152110}.

[92] Greitens, Kardon, and Waltz, 'A new world cop on the beat?', p. 30.

[93] Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative'.

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partnerships amid growing strategic competition between China and the United States. Vietnam might be seen as a primary example in this regard. The country is involved in security issues related to both the Mekong and the South China Sea, and it has sought to manage them by bringing in the United States while not antagonising China. Thailand is also an interesting case. While Bangkok nowadays participates – albeit cautiously – in joint law enforcement cooperation with Beijing, the country also maintains – at least officially – its security alliance with the United States. Those constellations correspond with the fact, as noted before, that Xi has explicitly used statements about the GSI to reject bloc confrontation[94] – and, by extension, to allow for security portfolio diversification.

Another significant factor regarding the recognition and acceptance of China's role as a security provider refers to its ideational dimensions. For one thing, China and its GSI partners share a similar understanding of security – one that tends to contrast with Western interpretations of the concept. The wording of the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan illustrates this point, emphasising that China and its African partners 'are willing to jointly implement the GSI and carry out early cooperation on the GSI with the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security'.[95] Such an understanding grants all countries the right to security (common), extends beyond a narrow focus on the military domain (comprehensive), is not directed against third parties and rules out foreign intervention (cooperative), and underscores the role of development in addressing the root causes of insecurity (sustainable). This conception of security is one that China's GSI partners can readily subscribe to – not least because it gives them a say and addresses their needs (see also above).

For another thing, and in line with the often hybrid or autocratic character of many of its GSI partners already mentioned above, security assistance from China is typically perceived as originating from a 'like-minded' country – one that is itself authoritarian and therefore expected not only to understand how to maintain internal and regime security but also to have a vested interest in making the world safe for autocratic rule. This contrasts with the widespread perception of the United States, according to which many non-democratic elites believe that Washington tacitly or explicitly supports pro-democratic opposition movements inside their countries[96] – even though this perception appears to have declined under the second Trump administration. Many African countries, for example, support the GSI in part because its principles of non-interference and non-intervention, respect for sovereignty, and development-focused security are appealing to them and offer a welcome alternative to what is frequently perceived as Western interventionism.[97]

Summary

Taken together, China's emerging role as an international security provider aligns well with the security-related roles of its GSI partners. The latter not only seek security from capable countries such as China in general but are also receptive to China's understanding of security and to the non-military forms of security assistance that China provides to bolster their internal security and sovereignty. In this respect, China fills a critical void left unaddressed by other security providers, such as the United States, while refraining from directly pressuring its GSI partners to abandon their hedging strategies in times of great-power rivalry. This role alignment, in turn, helps explain the growing number of specific collaboration projects between China and its partner countries under the banner of the GSI.

At the same time, it would be misleading to portray GSI partner countries in the global south merely as passive 'security seekers' that automatically align with China's security offerings. In practice, many governments actively evaluate, shape, and sometimes contest the scope and content

[94] Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at two'.
[95] 'Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027)'.
[96] Greitens and Kardon, 'Security without exclusivity'.
[97] Nantulya, 'Africa as a testing ground for China's Global Security Initiative'.

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of cooperation under the GSI.[98] While numerous states have expressed rhetorical support for the initiative, endorsement does not necessarily translate into unconditional alignment or full implementation. Instead, governments frequently adopt a selective approach, engaging with specific elements of Chinese security cooperation while limiting others that may raise sovereignty concerns, domestic political sensitivities, or geopolitical risks. This reflects broader patterns of agency among global south states, which increasingly seek to navigate a more pluralistic and competitive international security environment by diversifying their partnerships and extracting benefits from multiple external actors. In this sense, engagement with the GSI can also be understood as part of a broader strategy of strategic hedging and bargaining, through which smaller and medium-sized states attempt to maximise autonomy, secure resources, and enhance regime and domestic security without becoming overly dependent on any single provider. Consequently, the growing role alignment between China and some of its GSI partners should not be interpreted as a one-sided process driven solely by Beijing's initiatives. Rather, it emerges through interactive processes in which global south governments actively negotiate the terms, scope, and limits of security cooperation in accordance with their own domestic priorities and foreign policy strategies.

Conclusion

This article has examined support for China's Global Security Initiative, given that an increasing number of countries in the global south have officially endorsed the initiative, and on-the-ground implementation of related cooperation projects has likewise expanded, particularly in continental Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and (East) Africa. Applying role theory, this article has demonstrated that China's emerging role as an international security provider aligns well with the role conceptions of its GSI partner countries as security seekers – especially in areas that have been hallmarks of the GSI, namely, non-military security assistance aimed at bolstering internal and regime security. In line with role-theoretical assumptions, such role alignment then enhances the prospects for cooperation – an effect that we are indeed beginning to observe empirically, particularly through concrete programmes such as police cooperation and joint trainings in the realm of law enforcement.

What is more, this role alignment with China does not usually mean that GSI partner countries must take sides between China and the United States regarding the two sides' great-power rivalry. In fact, the more recent non-military security provisions from China, aimed at strengthening its partners' internal security, do not (directly) challenge the traditionally more military-focused security assistance from the United States, whose emphasis is on external defence. As of now, therefore, China provides security assistance abroad that is to a great extent complementary to that of the United States (and others), and, in doing so, Beijing is able to continuously expand its international security footprint at large.

Notably, our analysis also possesses some initial explanatory power beyond our selected examples. In particular, it helps to explain why support for the *Global* Security Initiative has – despite its name – been far from global. Most notably, as mentioned before, almost all Western countries have disregarded, or even explicitly rejected, the initiative. This Western scepticism towards the GSI is unsurprising in light of our role-theoretical argumentation. The GSI is officially promoted as a vehicle for achieving 'common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security', and its practical focus – as we have shown – has thus far been on non-military security cooperation aimed at strengthening internal and regime security. In this regard, however, most Western countries (with a few exceptions such as Hungary under Orban) are not normally security seekers. In addition, they would be unlikely to accept Chinese security provision – not least because Western countries also do not necessarily share the same understanding of security with China. Hence, there is little role alignment and, consequently, limited potential for cooperation. The same logic may apply to

[98]See also: Li and Su, 'Nontraditional security challenges and the geopolitics of transnational security cooperation in the Mekong region'.

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a country like India, which has refrained from supporting the GSI despite its membership in the SCO – an organisation that China envisions as a major platform for advancing the initiative.

At the same time, our article constitutes only a first step towards more comprehensive role-theoretical analysis of the GSI. Future research on the topic could proceed along several promising avenues. For example, and as noted before, endorsement of the GSI has actually been far from uniform even within the global south. In other words, it appears likely that being a (potential) security seeker in matters of internal and regime security does not always – and not to the same degree – lead to role alignment and cooperation with China under the GSI. More specific and detailed case studies are therefore needed to help us understand why role alignment fails either to materialise or to produce (meaningful) collaboration in such cases. In this regard, it may be particularly interesting to explore the role that the domestic political systems of potential GSI partners play in shaping their reactions. In a related vein, even among countries that have endorsed the GSI, practical implementation has at times been slow to emerge. From a role-theoretical perspective, this raises questions about the depth and sustainability of role alignment between China and its GSI partners. Put differently, is the role alignment whose existence we have sought to demonstrate just the result of tactical 'role-playing' – that is, the adoption of new roles with only a shallow level of internalisation, ready to be abandoned when the opportunity arises?[99] Or, alternatively, to what extent might the slow implementation of the GSI stem from ongoing role contestation between China and its partner countries? Again, case studies that go deeper than the *grosso modo* approach we have adopted in this article could be useful for answering these – and other related – questions. As China's international security footprint is likely to only increase going forward, more scholarly research is needed to understand the complex dynamics resulting from this significant trend.

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[99]See Michalski and Pan, 'Role dynamics in a structured relationship'.

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