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Op-ed

WHEN POWER REFUSES TO EVOLVE: RETHINKING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE **China's Global Governance Initiative isn't defiance — it's a response to paralysis**

By Daryl Swanepoel

When President Xi Jinping unveiled the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) earlier this year, Western capitals reacted as though the world had just tilted on its axis. The headlines were predictable: *China challenges the world order. Beijing builds a parallel system. The liberal rules-based order under siege.* But pause for a moment. Who exactly built this “order”? And more importantly, whose order is it?

For decades, the West has spoken of “universal values” while holding the keys to the institutions that define them. The United Nations Security Council remains a museum exhibit of 1945 power politics; the Bretton Woods institutions still tilt toward Washington and Brussels. Reform has been promised for half a century and yet, nothing changes.

So when China now says, “The world must reflect new realities,” is that revisionism or realism?

A world frozen in 1945

It's an uncomfortable truth: the post-war multilateral system is no longer representative of the world it claims to govern. Five nations still hold the veto over global peace and security. Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia remain spectators at the world's top diplomatic table.

Even the IMF and World Bank, those twin pillars of economic “cooperation”, still allocate voting power in a way that would make a colonial governor blush. China and India together account for nearly a fifth of global GDP, but hold less than a tenth of IMF voting shares.

What moral authority can a system claim when it denies the very equality it preaches?

Every summit ends with the same sterile chorus: “Reform is necessary.” Every communiqué fades into the same diplomatic purgatory. The United Nations promised transformation in 2005. Twenty years later, the Security Council looks identical and the Global South remains voiceless.

Is it any wonder that others are building their own platforms?

China's turn in the mirror

The GGI is not emerging in a vacuum. It is the latest in a trilogy, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and now this “governance” vision.

Western analysts call it a power play, but Beijing calls it reform. The truth, as usual, lies tangled between morality and self-interest. China's initiatives are no doubt designed to expand its influence. But let's be honest, what great power's initiatives weren't?

Was the Marshall Plan purely altruistic? Was NATO purely defensive? Was the IMF's structural adjustment program a gift to humanity or an assertion of ideological dominance?

Some might not like China's model, but perhaps they dislike even more the mirror it holds up to them: a mirror that reflects their own hypocrisy.

The moral double standard

Western policymakers have mastered the art of selective virtue. Democracy and human rights are invoked passionately when confronting adversaries, but conveniently set aside when dealing with oil-rich autocracies or strategic allies.

How many regimes, funded and armed by Western powers, remain among the world's most repressive? How many times has "intervention for democracy" ended in occupation, chaos and the convenient securing of natural resources?

If the liberal order were truly universal, would its rules not apply to Guantanamo Bay as much as to Xinjiang, to Gaza as much as to Crimea?

To call China's initiatives illegitimate simply because they advance Chinese interests is to ignore that the entire system of global governance is built on the pursuit of national interest, disguised as universal principle.

Who really blocks reform?

The West loves to accuse China of "parallelism," but what could be more parallel than the G7, NATO, AUKUS or the Quad, exclusive clubs designed to shape global affairs without universal consent?

The hypocrisy deepens when Western leaders issue noble statements about "reforming" the UN while quietly ensuring that no such reform ever happens. The United States, Britain and France cling to their veto power like divine rights. And Europe, despite preaching "efficiency," refuses even to merge its two (France & UK) Security Council seats.

Meanwhile, in the IMF and World Bank, Washington's Congress has repeatedly vetoed quota reforms that would give emerging economies a fairer voice. The message to the developing world is deafening: "We believe in democracy, except inside the institutions we control."

This is not leadership. It is guardianship of the past. And it is precisely this defensive rigidity that fuels the fragmentation of the multilateral system.

The "parallel system" that we created

Critics warn that China is creating a "parallel system", an architecture of influence to rival the liberal order. Yet who made this inevitable?

If the global institutions refuse to evolve, alternatives will arise. It is not the existence of China's initiatives that indicts the system, but its necessity.

The AIIB, the New Development Bank, the Belt and Road Forum and now the GGI, these are not the products of aggression, but of absence. They fill the void left by a West that preaches universality while practicing exclusion.

If the United Nations had reformed when it could, there might never have been space for these alternatives. The irony is stark. By defending a decaying order in the name of stability, the West has hastened its disintegration.

Beyond fear and containment

The great tragedy of our time is not that China seeks a bigger role, it is that the West cannot imagine one that is shared.

What if engagement, not containment, is the real test of leadership? What if the path to stability lies not in defending old hierarchies, but in building a plural order where power, legitimacy and responsibility are genuinely distributed?

It is easy to demonise Beijing's motives. Harder to confront their failure to reform. Easy to speak of "rules-based order." Harder to accept that the rules were written when most of today's world had no seat at the table.

The question, then, is not whether China's initiative threatens global governance, but whether the current system deserves to survive in its present form.

A reckoning for the liberal order

The liberal order once promised equality, peace and prosperity. Today it delivers stagnation, hypocrisy and disenchantment. Its self-proclaimed guardians, those who claim to protect democracy and human rights, have become prisoners of their own privilege.

The United States speaks of global responsibility, but walks out of international treaties at will. The European Union lectures others on governance while shutting out migrant voices and entrenching internal protectionism.

And all the while, the planet burns, pandemics spread and global debt chokes the poorest nations. The very institutions designed to coordinate global action have become theatres of paralysis.

If global governance were a patient, it would be in critical condition. And China's GGI, is, for better or worse, the defibrillator. Maybe controversial, untested, perhaps self-serving, but at least alive.

The ethical question

The deeper philosophical dilemma is whether a world order built on Western hegemony can reform itself from within or must it first be shaken by the emergence of new powers that demand recognition?

To dismiss China's rise as dangerous is to deny history itself. Every global transformation, from the British Empire to the post-war Pax Americana, was born from disruption. Why should the next be different?

Perhaps the real threat to world stability is not China's ambition, but our inability to imagine a fairer distribution of power.

A call for co-reform

The choice before policymakers is not binary. It is not "Western order" or "Chinese order." It is whether humanity can build a shared order before the fractures become irreparable.

To achieve that, the West must first confront its own contradictions. It must concede that representation is not surrender and that legitimacy cannot be manufactured through rhetoric.

Integrating China's initiatives into a broader multilateral framework could be a starting point and could begin by aligning the GGI's developmental agenda with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. And by connecting the AIIB's infrastructure projects with World Bank safeguards. Build bridges, not fortresses.

For China too, the burden of proof remains. If the GGI is to be credible, it must be transparent, accountable and genuinely inclusive, not merely a geopolitical instrument draped in multilateral language.

But let's be honest: condemning China's initiative without reforming ourselves is intellectual laziness disguised as moral courage.

The hardest question of all

In the end, the GGI is not simply China's project. It is a question flung back at the world: *Who speaks for humanity now?*

Is it those who inherited power and refused to share it? Or those who, having been excluded, now claim their turn at the table?

If the "rules-based order" cannot make room for the rest of the world, then perhaps it is not the rules that are in danger, but the order itself.

And so, before we accuse Beijing of rewriting the script, we must ask: who allowed the story to go stale?

The answer may not flatter us, but it might finally set us free.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI). This article draws on a soon to be published occasional paper titled 'Reforming global governance or building a parallel order? Rethinking the critique of China's Global Governance Initiative' published by the ISI.