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Why Is China's Global Security Initiative Cautiously Perceived in Southeast Asia?

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Journalists watch a screen showing China's President Xi Jinping delivering a speech during the opening of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2021 in Boao, south China's Hainan province on 20 April 2021. STR/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Global Security Initiative (GSI) – launched by President Xi Jinping in April 2022 – contains broad general principles that reiterate China’s previous foreign policy and security statements.
- The GSI is the latest expression of China’s international discourse that seeks to challenge the Western-led global governance system, and especially to de-legitimise the US role in Asia and advocate an exclusivist approach to Asian security governance.
- According to the State of Southeast Asia survey 2023, the region’s overall reaction to the GSI is rather ambivalent and cautious as they fear that the GSI will increase US-China tensions and intensify pressure on regional states to take sides.
- Judging 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.
- There is a gap between the GSI’s moralistic posturing and the manifested reality of China’s nationalistic foreign policy, especially in situations where China’s interests collide with those of its neighbouring states, such as the South China Sea disputes.
- Southeast Asian countries’ caution towards the GSI, in contrast to their support for China’s Global Development Initiative, indicates the dichotomy between their reservations about China’s role as a security provider and their appreciation of China’s role as an economic partner.
- The GSI can still gain traction in non-traditional and non-military areas, for example in law enforcement cooperation that cuts across the need to protect China’s overseas interests and to provide political/public security in some mainland Southeast Asian states.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference on 21 April 2022. The GSI is encapsulated in “six commitments”: (i) pursuing common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; (ii) respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (iii) abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; (iv) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; (v) peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation; and (vi) maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.¹

On 21 February 2023, China released the GSI concept paper which elaborates on the “six commitments” and identifies priorities areas of cooperation. According to the concept paper, the mechanisms for the GSI implementation include various Chinese initiatives at the UN system and Chinese engagement with the Global South via multiple multilateral platforms over which China has strong ownership and influence, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS cooperation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), among others.² As China’s near-abroad and being situated at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asia is arguably one of the most critical constituencies of the GSI. It is listed as the first region in the GSI concept paper’s priorities of cooperation, followed by the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Pacific island countries. This article examines the strategic rationale behind the GSI and how it has been received and perceived in Southeast Asia.

WHAT DOES THE GSI STAND FOR?

The GSI with its “six commitments” is contained within only one paragraph but its strategic rationale is organically linked to other parts of Xi’s entire speech, especially those promoting “Asian cooperation”, “Asian unity” and “Asian family”. This, coupled with the fact that Xi chose the Boao Forum to launch the GSI, suggests that China’s strategic gaze remains intensely focused on Asia where it is locked in a contest for primacy with the US. The GSI is in large part an extension of China’s New Asian Security Concept introduced by Xi himself at the 2014 Boao Forum which appeals to non-Western sentiments, de-legitimises the US role in Asia and advocates an exclusivist approach to Asian security governance.³

The “six commitments” of the GSI are long embedded in China’s national and international security discourse. It consolidates the basic norms of modern China’s foreign policy codified in the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference. The GSI also replays the terms “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” from the New Asian Security Concept. The only new addition to the GSI is the commitment “to take the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously” which derives from the ‘indivisible security’ concept. This concept was first coined in the Cold War-era 1975 Helsinki Final Act and then the 1990 Charter of Paris for New Europe which stated that “security is indivisible and the security of every participating State is

inseparably linked to that of all the others.”⁴ The Charter, however, also “fully recognize[s] the freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements”, a key principle that both China and Russia wilfully overlook.

While the logic of ‘indivisible security’ – i.e. the pursuit of one’s security should not be at the expense of others’ security – seems straightforward, its interpretation and application are highly subjective, especially in terms of defining the threshold of “at the expense of other’s security”. This concept has become particularly controversial after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 using the pretext that NATO’s eastward expansion jeopardised Russia’s security interests. Although China stops short of endorsing Russia’s action, Beijing is aligned with Moscow in attributing the cause of the war to NATO and the West, and has actively propagated this narrative. A couple of weeks before Russia’s invasion, Moscow and Beijing signed the 4 February 2022 joint statement, evoking ‘indivisible security’ to oppose NATO’s expansion and vowing that both countries would “stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions”, namely Europe for Russia and Asia for China.⁵ As such, ‘indivisible security’ would potentially become a new sound bite and normative device for China to advance its longstanding geopolitical end goal, namely to dismantle the US’ alliance system and security partnerships which Beijing sees as detrimental to its own security and hegemonic ambitions in the region.

The GSI should also be perceived in the broader context of China’s push to reform the global governance system to better suit its interests and values, alongside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI), among others.⁶ The GSI now becomes the overarching framework for multiple Chinese security initiatives at the UN and in the Global South that seek to challenge the Western-led global system and project itself as a leader in the global governance and security architecture.⁷ Xi’s speech at the 2022 Boao Forum and subsequent Chinese commentaries on the GSI are full of tropes framing China as a responsible actor – e.g. in enabling the world’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, poverty reduction and economic recovery – versus the US and its allies that engage in “exclusive, bloc politics”, “decoupling”, “supply chain disruption” and “maximum pressure”. The most common refrain is that the GSI reflects “true multilateralism”, advocates “democracy in international relations”, and offers “a new type of security path of dialogue rather than conflict, forming partnerships rather than alliances, and win-win rather than zero-sum outcomes”.⁸ Of note, the GSI has also been used to undermine US-led efforts to rally international punitive measures against Russia, including what China views as “the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction”.⁹

Another angle that needs further examination is the nexus between the GSI and China’s Comprehensive National Security (CNS) concept. Introduced in 2014, the CNS reflects Xi Jinping’s thinking about national security that aims to realise the “unity of political security, people’s security and national interests”.¹⁰ Under this concept, national security covers multiple types of security, with “political security” at the top as well as other areas of consequence to international security such as “security of overseas interests”, “resource security”, “space security”, “polar security” and “deep-sea security”.¹¹ In April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands inked a security agreement that allows China, upon the Solomon Islands’ request, to send its “police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order”; such

Chinese forces can also be used “to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in the Solomon Islands”.¹² The agreement is a clear example of the convergence between the protection of Chinese overseas interests and the imperative to ensure regime security of the host country, which provides a perfect condition for China to expand its military footprint in this strategic location.

SOUTHEAST ASIA’S AMBIVALENT AND CAUTIOUS RESPONSE

Southeast Asians Are Cautious and Ambivalent about the GSI

While receptions of the GSI vary across Southeast Asian countries, the overall reaction has been rather muted and cautious. According to the State of Southeast Asia 2023 survey, 44.5% of respondents express little or no confidence that the GSI will benefit the region versus 27.4% who feel confident or very confident. The sense of ambivalence and uncertainty is also palpable as 28% choose the ‘no comment’ option.¹³ Respondents from Brunei, Cambodia and Laos are most supportive of the GSI while those from Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia are most cautious, followed by the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Table 1: How Confident Are You in China’s Global Security Initiative to Benefit the Region?

(State of Southeast Asia survey 2023)

| | Little/no confidence | No comment | Confident/very confident |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| ASEAN | 44.5% | 28% | 27.4% |
| Brunei | 21.7% | 20.8% | 57.5% |
| Cambodia | 16.4% | 34.3% | 49.3% |
| Indonesia | 59.5% | 21.5% | 19% |
| Laos | 19.7% | 45.8% | 34.6% |
| Malaysia | 44.4% | 30.6% | 25% |
| Myanmar | 68.7% | 23.5% | 7.8% |
| Philippines | 52.6% | 29.3% | 18.2% |
| Singapore | 44.2% | 32.2% | 23.6% |
| Thailand | 52.1% | 20.1% | 27.8% |
| Vietnam | 66.2% | 22.1% | 11.7% |

The above results largely mirror the official responses from most Southeast Asian governments to the GSI (except for Myanmar¹⁴ and Thailand). The outcome documents of Xi’s recent meetings with the Vietnamese, Indonesian, Singaporean and Philippine leaders suggest the latter’s cautious position vis-à-vis the GSI, in contrast to their warm embrace of the GDI. The Chinese read-out of Xi’s meeting with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in November 2022 said that both sides would pursue the GDI but made no reference to the GSI.¹⁵ Speaking at an international conference in May 2022, Lee voiced Singapore’s support for the GDI but refrained from any mention of the GSI.¹⁶ Like Singapore, Malaysia has stayed silent on the initiative – the read-outs from both Malaysia and China regarding the Wang Yi-

Saifuddin meeting in July 2022 did not mention the GSI and focused mainly on economic cooperation.¹⁷ As for Vietnam, according to the joint statement on the occasion of Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to Beijing in October 2022, Vietnam recognises China's GSI only on the basis of the goals and principles of the UN Charter while expressing its support for and readiness to participate in the GDI.¹⁸ Likewise, the joint press statement during Indonesia's President Joko Widodo's visit to China in July 2022 simply stated that Indonesia "takes note of the Global Security Initiative" but said much more about bilateral cooperation to implement the GDI, including development-oriented financing, cooperation in health, agriculture, poverty alleviation, food security, green development and digital economy.¹⁹

Typical of the Southeast Asian hedging position, the GSI is mentioned in their high-level joint statements with China but with certain qualifications. First, Southeast Asian countries are willing to consider the GSI so long as it conforms to the principles of the UN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) to which China is a party. Second, further details and communication on the GSI are needed to explore future cooperation, as reflected in the Indonesia-China joint statement in November 2022²⁰ and the Philippines-China joint statement²¹ during President Marcos Jr.'s visit to China in January 2023. The ambivalent and non-committal attitude by these major ASEAN member states has been extrapolated to the ASEAN level, as reflected in the chairman's statement of the 2022 ASEAN-China summit which "took note of the GSI proposed by China... and looked forward to further details of the GSI".²²

Except for Vietnam, other mainland Southeast Asian countries appear to be more supportive of the GSI. The joint statement during Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to China in early February 2023 says that "Cambodia supports China's proposal of GSI, and stands ready to work with China on global security governance towards common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security."²³ According to Chinese sources, Thailand and Myanmar respectively expressed support for the GSI and GDI at the meeting between Xi and Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in November 2022; and at a working-level meeting with Myanmar's ambassador to China in January 2023.²⁴ In an interview with *Global Times* in September 2022, the Lao ambassador to China also stated that her government attaches importance to and welcomes the GSI, alongside the BRI and GDI, because they "embrace the expectations of the countries to promote peace, development and win-win cooperation".²⁵ It is argued that Southeast Asian countries that do not have territorial and maritime disputes with China and that lean towards China strategically tend to hold more favourable views about the GSI.

The GSI as a Public Good: Rhetoric and Reality

Southeast Asian countries generally subscribe to the GSI principles, especially the pursuit of comprehensive and cooperative security, respect of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, sanctity of the UN Charter, peaceful settlement of disputes, and security in both traditional and non-traditional domains. The GSI concept paper's affirmation of support for ASEAN-centred regional security architecture and adherence to the ASEAN way of consensus-building also sounds assuring. What then explains Southeast Asians' hesitance to embrace the GSI wholesale?

The devil is in the practice because there is a yawning gap between China's high-sounding moralistic posturing and the manifested reality of its nationalistic foreign policy. It boils down to the question of how China would interpret and apply these principles in specific security situations where its interests collide with those of its neighbouring countries. Although the principle of sovereign equality is pre-requisite to friendly inter-state relations and in accordance with the UN Charter,²⁶ China's policy and behaviour in the South China Sea disputes indicate the "winner takes all" approach. China's preaching about these principles falls flat given its excessive claims that violate the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and its constant encroachments, intimidations and harassments against other claimant states. For all the Chinese talk about making the South China Sea "a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation", Southeast Asians' top two concerns in these waters are (i) China's militarisation and assertive actions and (ii) China's encroachments in the maritime zones of other littoral states.²⁷ Likewise, China's support for the purposes and principles of the UN Charter does not square with its decision not to criticise Russia's invasion of Ukraine and instead lend propaganda support for Moscow's justification for waging its war?²⁸

Southeast Asian reservations about the GSI are also rooted in their growing anxiety about the US-China rivalry. The fear that the GSI will increase US-China tensions and intensify pressure on regional states to take sides is the biggest reason for their doubts about the GSI, according to the SSEA survey 2023.²⁹ Of particular concern is the 'indivisible security' concept which serves as China's new normative device to discourage Southeast Asian countries from closer security ties or alliances with Washington. Beijing can be expected to fully exploit this concept in order to emphasise its sense of insecurity over the strategic autonomy of its neighbouring states to choose their own security arrangements.

In practice, the point that "security is indivisible" is so nebulous and subjective that it is of little help in addressing the deepening mistrust and security dilemma in the region. For example, although China criticises the US military presence and alliance/coalition building with its Asian partners as hurting Chinese national security, China's own military build-up and power projection have been alarming to the South China Sea littoral states as well. The annual SSEA survey among foreign policy-security establishments in Southeast Asia consistently ranks China as the most distrusted major power (although the degrees of distrust may vary across regional countries). This distrust is rooted in their fear of losing sovereignty, territorial integrity and strategic autonomy in making their own foreign policy choices in the face of a strong and assertive China (Table 2). It is doubtful that the moral high ground that China claims in the GSI would help alleviate these concerns.

Table 2: Why Do You Distrust China and What Can China Do to Improve Ties?
(*State of Southeast Asia survey 2020-2023*)

| | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <i>Why do you distrust China? (top 2 responses)</i> | | | | |
| China’s economic and military power could be used to threaten my country’s interests and sovereignty | 53.5% | 54.5% | 49.6% | 41.4% |
| I do not consider China a reliable power | 19.1% | 24% | 23% | 26.6% |
| <i>What can China do to improve relations with your country? (top 2 responses)</i> | | | | |
| China should resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law. | 74.1% | 65.9% | 64.6% | 59.8% |
| China should respect my country’s sovereignty and not constrain my country’s foreign policy choices. | 61.8% | 68.9% | 77.3% | 54.2% |

Where Can the GSI Gain Traction?

Since the GSI adopts an encompassing definition of security, it stands a good chance to gain traction in non-military and non-traditional areas. Given the proximity and expanding connectivity between China and the region, law enforcement cooperation to address transnational crimes is a major area where China’s capacity and resources can be brought to bear. Apart from cooperation at the bilateral and ASEAN levels, one noteworthy minilateral arrangement in this respect is the Mekong river joint patrol by China, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, with 125 joint patrols being carried out thus far since its start in 2011.³⁰ While such cooperation is mutually beneficial and necessary for practical reasons, it may have long-term strategic implications in enabling the extraterritorial reach of China’s law enforcement in some mainland Southeast Asian states.³¹

There is also a growing nexus between the need to ensure political/public security in those countries that have weak state capacity and their policing cooperation with China in the name of strengthening local law enforcement capabilities and protecting China’s overseas interests. The China-Solomon Islands security agreement stands as a clear example. Elements of this nexus are emerging in some mainland Southeast Asian states. At a meeting with his Cambodia counterpart in 2021, Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi called for “enhanced cooperation in preventing political security risks, implementing drug control and strengthening law enforcement capabilities to promote the building of a community with a shared future between the two countries.”³² In Myanmar, following the coup in 2021, the junta regime has sought China’s assistance to step up its policing of internet use, including to obtain information on political dissidents and protestors.³³ In Laos, where China is the largest foreign investor with multiple special economic zones and the recently launched Vientiane-Kunming railway, both countries have agreed to strengthen security cooperation for major Belt and Road projects, safeguard national security and address transnational crimes, including through China’s equipment transfer and personnel training.³⁴ Seen from this angle, the GSI could effectively serve as a purveyor of China’s state-centred and all-encompassing approach to security and “market globally the instruments of China’s security state”.³⁵

Another area where the GSI will draw international applause is its affirmation that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”.³⁶ While this is a longstanding policy of China, this affirmation holds a significant meaning at this juncture as President Putin of Russia – China’s “no-limits” partner – has been using nuclear blackmail in his war against Ukraine. In this respect, China can also take the moral high ground as it is the only nuclear weapon state that agrees to sign on to the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty without any reservation.

Last but not least, the GSI has been rolled out in conjunction with the GDI, reflecting the integration of security and development in China’s global outreach that sees “development as the basis for security, and security as the condition for development”.³⁷ China has already made its mark in terms of supporting Southeast Asian countries in pandemic response, vaccine support and economic development, and has leveraged its positive impact in these fields to further its geopolitical goals in the region. It is in these non-traditional, non-military areas that China is better positioned as a leader and provider of regional public goods.

CONCLUSION

There are some paradoxes that China – in its push to become a provider of regional security – should take notice of. First, China has become “more militarily capable than ever”, according to the latest Asia Power Index 2023 report.³⁸ Yet, few Southeast Asians in the foreign policy-security establishment think that China’s military is an asset for global peace and security, as found in the SSEA annual survey.³⁹ Military cooperation also ranks as the lowest option in foreign policy preferences towards China, according to a recent public opinion survey in Indo-Pacific states, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.⁴⁰ Second, while Southeast Asian countries would, in principle, agree with China that development guarantees security, their explicit support for the GDI and caution towards the GSI indicates the dichotomy between their appreciation of China’s importance as an economic partner and their reservation about China’s role as a security provider. As noted by Evelyn Goh, China’s hegemonic bargain towards the region may have gained significant headway in the economic domain, but in the security domain, China still needs “to demonstrate credible self-restraint for reassurance”.⁴¹ To persuade regional states that it is a net contributor to regional security and stability, China should exert more efforts to match its words with its deeds.

ENDNOTES

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³⁷ Helena Legarda, op. cit.

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³⁹ The State of Southeast Asia survey reports from 2019 to 2023 can be accessed at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>.

⁴⁰ Richard Q. Turcsányi, Kristina Kironská, Alfred Gerstl, Klára Dubravčíková, James Iocovozzi, Peter Gries, Andrew Chubb and Matej Šimalčík, *Public opinion in the Indo-Pacific: Divided on China, cheering for US & EU*, CEIAS, November 2022. ISBN: 978-80-8239-010-3, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Draft-2_FINAL.pdf.

⁴¹ Evelyn Goh, Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia, *Security Studies*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2019.1604989.

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