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“Great Changes” and Global Governance Reform: Explaining China’s Global Security Initiative

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Abstract: The Global Security Initiative (GSI) represents China's official reform proposal for international security governance, yet existing perspectives fail to adequately explain its global scope, causal mechanisms, and the relationship between structural and specific variables. This paper addresses these gaps by offering two key innovations: first, it systematically traces the evolution of China's security concepts, revealing overlooked historical continuities; second, it introduces a parsimonious causal framework that hierarchically links structural conditions ('great changes unseen in a century'), specific triggers (e.g., the Ukraine War and U.S.-led security arrangements in Asia-Pacific), and the GSI's global ambitions. Through hierarchical textual analysis, the study demonstrates how China's rise creates structural incentives for global governance reform while necessitating strategies to mitigate its great power dilemma. Theoretically, it advances debates on security governance by integrating structural and agency-driven explanations. Practically, it clarifies the GSI's strategic rationale, offering policymakers a nuanced understanding of China's approach to systemic change.

Keywords: Global Security Initiative; International Order; China's Rise

1. Introduction

China's Global Initiatives are a crucially important part of its foreign policy. Together, the Global Development, Civilization, and Security Initiatives form China's baseline vision for international order reform and the building blocks of its "Community with a Shared Future." Because of the often loose and vaporous nature of these proposals, much scholarship around them focuses on the interpretation and operationalization of their principles rather than on positioning them within larger questions on Chinese Foreign Policy. Indeed, this might be, as Zeng Jinghan has suggested, a core characteristic of Chinese foreign policymaking. However, while being more broad declarations of principles than plans for institutional design, the Global Initiatives must still be framed inside the contours and, therefore, the study of foreign policy change, subject to questions about causality. In addition, the particular importance of the Global Initiatives should be evident to scholars: they are the expressions of preferences and, in consequence, guides for the strategic behavior of "the most important player in the history of the world," as Lee Kwan Yew described China. Therefore, scholars must pay attention to what causes such consequential policy changes and declarations to understand and predict them and their impacts. This paper aims to do just that for the case of the Global Security Initiative.

Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered the keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum, sometimes referred to as the Davos or World Economic Forum of Asia, on April 21st, 2022. His speech was titled "Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation," a broad enough scope for the occasion. The beginning of Xi's intervention dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. The ending with concerns over China's economy. However, right in the middle was a highly consequential policy declaration: the Global Security Initiative (GSI). The venue and occasion also were not coincidental: past declarations of China's security concepts, the Five Principles of Peaceful

Coexistence (FPPC), the New Security Concept (NSC), and the New Asian Security Concept (NASC) were all announced in arrangements that indicated their intended scope or target for application; China and India's bilateral negotiations, internal ASEAN meetings, and CICA and then the Indonesian Parliament, respectively. The Boao Forum as a venue, therefore, indicated the, indeed, global scope of the GSI.

Furthermore, China's international security frameworks are essentially an upgrade of the same principles to areas that previously did not directly concern it. The FPPC was an internal guide, the NSC was national policy, the NASC was a regional initiative (though short-lived), and the GSI is global. However, there appears to be a gap in this evolution. China's enunciation of the FPPC in 1954-1955 makes perfect sense as a general declaration of principles and preferences of the newly established People's Republic. The NSC was announced during the 1990s after major global strategic shifts resulting from the end of the Cold War. The NASC poses the most interesting point when compared with the GSI. As Ross had predicted more than a decade earlier, by 2014, China was undoubtedly a regional power in both capabilities and interests, so its trying to shape the security environment of Asia is perfectly logical. The NASC proved short-lived due to issues with its formulation that resulted in pushback and narratives of a "Chinese Monroe Doctrine" that will be further discussed below. In contrast, China's global security influence and capabilities, while arguably global, are nowhere near as expansive to necessitate an international security framework that does for China what its alliance system does for the US. China is not a global military power, holds a non-alliance policy, and prefers bilateral security cooperation, so its capability to extend security is severely limited. Therefore, what drove this expansion of the GSI?

2. Methodology

To study the causes of the GSI, this paper will use hierarchical textual analysis. This methodology has its origin in Donald S. Zagoria's seminal study of the Sino-Soviet conflict and consists in taking as valid and meaningful *a priori* the words and documents of the actor under study. Moreover, it is the same as that used by Rush Doshi, whose "offensive hypothesis" is one of two here tested and integrated.

A common objection to this methodology is that the documents and speeches of these actors are meant to mislead or are simply lies. It would follow that it is completely impossible to have any idea of their principles and objectives. This assertion is not only erroneous but dangerous. It is dangerous because, by the aforementioned corollary, it means that nothing but the actor's own perception is valid and, in fact, there is no real and non-fallacious basis for establishing a hierarchy of perceptions. It is erroneous for several reasons. First, it contains a significant degree of projection. As Mearsheimer rightly shows in his study on the subject, lying and deception are used interchangeably and for similar purposes in public and in private by both leaders of liberal states and leaders of illiberal states, whereas this argument assumes that the latter's behavior is inextricably linked to and determined by their illiberal nature. Secondly, as Doshi explains.

authoritative Party and state documents compiled by official presses are, after all, edited and manipulated in ways that leaked documents are not. But rather than overstate China's ambitions or threat perceptions, these documents should be seen as likely to understate them [...] In addition, these texts are unlikely to play up China's ambitions for nationalist audiences because they are not widely read outside of Party audiences.

Doshi establishes a detailed and hierarchical classification of the various sources to be used according to their authority on the subject:

Table 1: Hierarchical Textual Analysis

Hierarchy of primary sources	
<i>Hierarchy of Documents for Insight into the Party's Foreign Policy Judgements</i>	
Leader Speeches	Party Congress Reports Major Internal Foreign Policy Addresses Other Internal Leader Party Speeches
External-Facing Foreign Policy Documents	Addresses to Foreign Audiences by Leaders or Senior Officials Government White Papers

Party Media on Party Judgments	Renmin Ribao Pseudonymous Editorials and Commentaries <i>Qiushi</i> and <i>Xuehi Shibao</i> Commentaries
Functional Sources	Ministry and Military Documents and Statements Material from Ministry and Military Publishing Presses
<i>Think tanks</i> and Academic Commentary	Comments from Well-Connected Scholars Comments from Government-Affiliated Programs

Source: Rush Doshi. *The Long Game*

Because of resources and time constraints, this paper will prioritize the two highest levels of analysis. This ensures that the materials in question are the most authoritative and, therefore, it retains that quality as well, but it would be necessary in the future to add input from the latter three levels as, in particular, functional sources and Party media provide significant operational and public opinion perspectives, respectively. In addition, public-facing documents are of particular importance to the analysis of the GSI, as these, while concepts in themselves, are framed within larger ones such as the Community of a Shared Future. Consequently, it is necessary to find them and identify their characteristics in larger documents such as government White Papers.

In addition to this analysis, past research will also be considered as secondary sources on the GSI's causality. However, these are subject to the critical standards previously established and, in particular, primary sources will be considered more authoritative than secondary sources. The logic of this method is simple: primary sources, although subject to obvious biases and ulterior motives, provide at least a factual basis for analysis, superior to the speculation of the secondary sources, and approximately the same factual basis for those judgments and theorizations based on logical inference (always respecting the above criteria) from the primary materials.

3. Literature Review

A brief look at past security concepts may help answer this paper's question. The NSC responded to the new security environment after the Cold War. The NASC resulted from the US pivot to Asia and was wedded to the grand strategy of Striving for Achievement (SFA). In short, past literature shows that China tends to upgrade security concepts due to geopolitical shifts that directly affect China.

As mentioned, most scholarly work on the GSI mainly focuses on decoding or interpreting its contents and on its application. Apart from this, some perspectives on the causality of the GSI contain two salient mistakes. Firstly, some authors confuse objectives, that is, what China intends to do with the GSI, with causes. Objectives and causality are two different concepts; they both answer the question "why," but instrumentality deals with the future while causality deals with the past. Actual, knowable causality must reside in the past, for the future has not happened. Secondly, other authors point to constant factors like the "security deficit" of Western concepts as a cause. It is in the nature of constants not to be able to explain change; the content of other concepts may influence the content of the GSI but cannot account for its proposal.

Any adequate explanation of a change in security concept must have three components: a clear structural causal indicator, a clear specific causal indicator, and, most importantly, a clear causal indicator of the scope of such concept. Furthermore, outside the scope of this question, the content of any such concept must be ideationally explained. No such holistic explanation exists. Most authors identify "great changes unseen in a century," China's official diagnosis of the current state of international politics, as the structural cause of the GSI. Two gaps remain unaddressed here. First, structural factors cannot explain specific behavior; they must instead be understood as conditions of possibility, not causes. Second, the causal link between these conditions of possibility and the GSI is not explained.

Chinese and non-Chinese scholars diverge in the specific causes they posit. The former point to the rise of "hegemonism," understood as the US containment of China, and the nascent security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific that have come to be named as the "Asian NATO" discourse. The latter agree on this last cause but highlight the importance of the Ukraine War as a trigger for the GSI. Here, too, the causal link is not clearly laid out. Furthermore, these specific causes leave the causal scope indicator in a strange position. It is almost entirely absent in the literature, and the above causes

are seemingly either bilateral (US containment) or regional (Ukraine War and Asian NATO), which would have difficulties explaining the global ambitions of the GSI. Some authors have proposed interesting alternatives: for Han, the GSI is only global in name and seems to be more of a regional initiative adapted to the security needs of Asia; for Javid, the GSI serves to securitize China's global economic interests as codified by the Global Development Initiative.

Han's point has more merit because, even though he does not explicitly say so, the short time between the NASC and the GSI, as well as the brief life of the NASC as a proposal, does indicate that the GSI also plays the role intended by the NASC but without prompting the previously mentioned "Chinese Monroe Doctrine" discourse. However, the GSI is undoubtedly global, so this fact cannot be as central. Han and Javid neglect the fact that China's actions under the GSI extend well beyond Asia and are independent of development. The China Institute of International Studies recently published the most comprehensive review of China's activities under the GSI, proving these points. Security and development are inextricably linked in China's international behavior, but it is not very useful to subordinate one to the other as Javid does. This may have been more possible under the grand strategy of Keeping a Low Profile. Still, under SFA, the priority given to politics and the outward direction of development make this obscure more than it reveals.

4. Hypothesis and Causal Mechanism

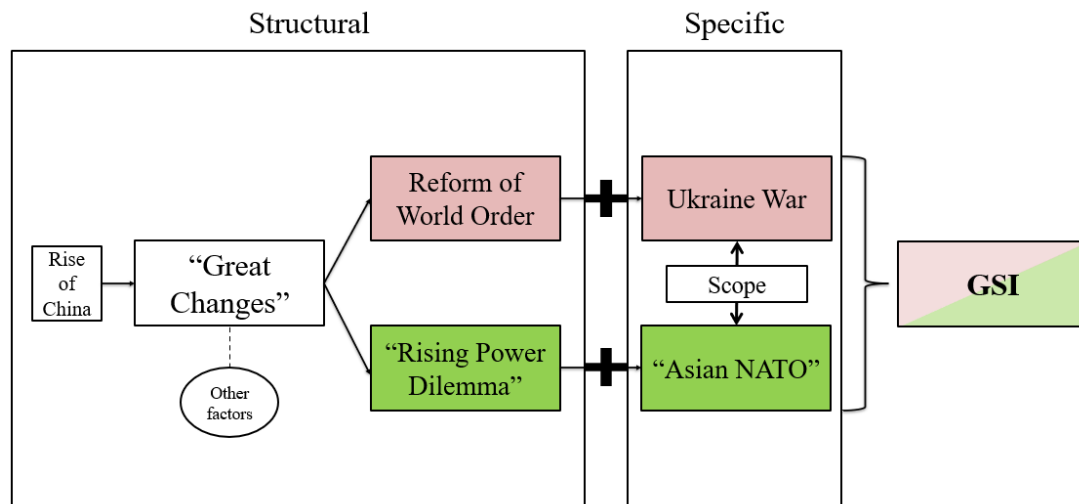
The above literature review reveals that little is clear about the causes of the GSI. Consequently, this paper seeks to provide some clarity. The intuitions of some scholars about it may prove to be correct. Still, no new knowledge is created without a straightforward and logical explanation of the relations between purported causes and purported effects, for it provides no predictive potential. Specifically, this paper will (1) clarify the causal mechanism between the structural environment and the GSI through what I shall call the "offensive" school of Chinese foreign policy analysis and the "defensive" school, which provide two sides of the same coin; (2) parse through the two proposed specific causes of the GSI, the Ukraine War and US containment of China, to understand why they may indeed be its causes and how they, in turn, relate to the structural causes through both the "offensive" and "defensive" schools; and (3) explain the global extent of the GSI using the linkage between the two specific causes and, in turn, with the general grand strategy brought about by structural factors. The result will be a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the causes of the GSI.

The resulting hypothetical causal mechanism functions as follows: China's rise, understood as the growth of its comprehensive capacity, is one of the main drivers of "great changes unseen in a century." This is not to say that it is the only one or that "great changes unseen in a century" are a uniquely geopolitical diagnosis. It is rather a comprehensive one that includes, for example, technological change and the Fourth Industrial Revolution but relates all of its aspects to each other. This structural environment gives rise to two general motivators for actions: seeking to reform or displace aspects of present US-centric world order ("offensive") and alleviating China's rising power dilemma ("defensive"); US containment of China through new security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific in the past four years represents the specific causal variable of the "defensive" side of the equation prompting China to propose the GSI as a defensive counter to it. This is the main strategic continuity in all of China's international security concepts. The FPPC were expressions of preference under the Cold War context. The NSC resulted from the systemic pressures of post-Cold War US unipolarity and aimed to counter US security advancements in Southeast Asia. The NASC was a direct consequence of the US pivot to Asia. Thus, the GSI fits parsimoniously within the general theorization of China's international security concepts evolution.

Conversely, the Ukraine War, more accurately, what it represents, is the "offensive" prompt to propose an alternative to this failure of international security arrangements. Here, it is crucial to understand the central characteristic of change as a philosophical concept: change as the emergence of something entirely new does not exist; instead, change is the dialectical overflowing of quantity into quality. Only thusly can reason operate, for if there was no conceptual continuity between events and realities, no pattern, i.e., science, could ever be recognized. Consequently, these events are that dialectical overflowing, not seismic paradigm shifts by themselves.

This, in turn, helps to find the causal indicator of scope: because both specific causal indicators are manifestations of the structural causal indicator, which is a global, comprehensive, and not only one of traditional security, the GSI must be equally global and comprehensive. As mentioned, “great changes unseen in a century” is not merely a geopolitical diagnosis in hard terms, i.e. military power, but one that encompasses traditional security and aspects that could be considered non-traditional security like technological change, organized crime, terrorism, cyberspace, etc. Thus, this explains the apparent disconnect between China’s security interests and capabilities and the scope of the GSI.

Figure 1: Causal Mechanism of the Global Security Initiative



5. Evidence

5.1 Structural Causes

Much of International Relations theory that focuses on state action, i.e., realism in all its forms, agrees that the concentration and distribution of power is the main variable explaining state behavior and outcomes in world politics, although others, like perception, play important roles. Therefore, a major change in this variable, like China’s rise and the perception of it since approximately 2016, should prompt equally impactful changes in state behavior. In the original formulation of the concept, “great changes unseen in a century” was linked to the situation of the US and not to that of China. However, diagnoses of power in international politics are always relative, meaning that the decline in US power under “great changes” can only be understood conversely also as both a consequence and cause of China’s rise.

This is plainly the way Chinese policymakers frame the concept. For example, Xi Jinping, at the historic 2018 Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, linked the two, saying that “at present, China is in the best development period since modern times, and the world is in a state of great changes not seen in one hundred years, and these two [trends] are simultaneously interwoven and mutually interacting.” It is also evident that this is one of the major strategic considerations of policymakers for action. As Xi put it in another speech: “I often say that the leading cadres must keep two overall situations in mind, one is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the other is the great changes unseen in a century. This is the basic starting point of our planning work.” Therefore, it is clear that “great changes” is the main structural diagnosis of China’s policymakers, that this diagnosis is a result of China’s relative rise, and that it is an operational concept with policy impact. Furthermore, it is clear that “great changes” are linked to the GSI. The “Global Security Initiative Concept Paper” explicitly mentions that “our world, our times and history are changing in ways like never before.” The same phrase was mentioned by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a speech to diplomats, Vice Minister Chen Xiaodong at the Boao Forum in 2024, and Xi in his original speech proposing the GSI.

However, this does not amount to an operationalization of the concept for specific policies but for equally structural ones, i.e., grand strategies. Here, the main question is how structural factors coalesce into grand strategy. This paper will use two major perspectives on the matter. The “offensive” school of Chinese grand strategy, represented most saliently and recently by Rush Doshi, and the “defensive” school of Chinese grand strategy represented by Sun Xuefeng. For Doshi, the main way in which structural considerations affect China’s grand strategy is in its relative assessment of power disparity and threat level from the US, both codified as either high or low. Therefore, his framing is explicitly dyadic and presents four possible grand strategies in relation to his structural factors. In Doshi’s analysis, “great changes” as understood by China indicates a perception of power disparity as relatively low or at least lower, and the threat perception from the US as high, therefore creating a grand strategy of “building,” explained as “construct[ing] the foundations for its own order by investing in its own forms of control- coercive capability, consensual inducement, and legitimacy” that can eventually lead to expansion once it is regionally established.

Table 2: Grand Strategies of Rising Powers Towards a Hegemonic Order

Grand Strategies of Rising Powers Towards a Hegemonic Order			
		Perception of power disparity	
		High	Low
Threat perception	High	Blunting	Building
	Low	Accommodation	Dominance

Source: Rush Doshi. *The Long Game*.

In sum, for Doshi, the Chinese grand strategy is oriented towards creating an alternative order more conducive to its interests. This is “offensive” because this order is built in opposition to the current US hegemonic position. Sun’s position is quite a contrast, being constructed from a less dyadic and more state-level, this being China’s, perspective. From this perspective, the structural pressures of “great changes” caused in part by China’s rise present themselves in the “rising power dilemma.” A rising state must find a way to safeguard its expanding national interests or growth in comprehensive capabilities and managing the external pressures that result from that expansion. This is “defensive” because actions will be geared toward maintaining the state’s growth, even if they secondarily imply challenging others.

However, these two guides for action are two sides of the same coin, for they both explain China’s actual present grand strategy, Striving for Achievement (SFA), under which the GSI must be understood. They simply do this from two different perspectives. From the offensive perspective, SFA manifests the grand strategy of “building,” for it, and consequently, the GSI, are ways to establish relations and institutions that support its interests, undermine the US, and reflect China’s preferences. From the defensive perspective, SFA is a reaction to the decline in the usefulness of the grand strategy of Keeping a Low Profile (KLP) and a way to alleviate the rising power’s dilemma by undertaking more security responsibility and, therefore, managing negative external pressures. These two perspectives are better understood as two instincts in a dialectical unity, one of which may take precedence over the other depending on the stimulus, but both referring to the same ultimate structural reality.

5.2 Specific Causes

In the case of the GSI, both of these instincts were engaged by two different events, each of which stimulates one side more than the other: the Ukraine War and US new security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific, referred to for brevity as “Asian NATO.” The Ukraine War appeals to the “offensive” side of the dialectic because it represents, at least in China’s perspective, the failure of Western security concepts in actually maintaining peace and security as a result of their non-comprehensive, non-universal, and exclusive nature. Therefore, it represents the relative decline of the US and an opportunity for China to promote its own vision of security arrangements to the world. This is evidenced in official documents and speeches. Wang Yi explicitly mentioned the “security deficit” and Ukraine in his speech, underlying this criticism of Western security concepts with the concept of “Cold War mentality.” So

did Vice Minister Le Yucheng, Vice President Han Zheng, and Assistant Minister Nong Rong among others. Of course, all this is also understandable from the angle of the other side of the dialectical unity as an attempt by China to alleviate its rising power dilemma by taking responsibility in the face of challenges and contributing as a responsible power, resulting in a better international political image. Indeed, the notion of responsibility is mentioned by Wang Yi, Le Yucheng, Han Zheng, Chen Xiaodong, and Nong Rong in relation to the GSI, by Li Qiang in other contexts, and in the GSI Concept Paper. There is no better example of this possible alternative perspective than China's efforts to position itself as future intermediary for resolving the conflict and its proposed peace plan.

However, a purer expression of the “defensive” side of the dialectic is represented by the GSI's second specific cause: the “Asian NATO” discourse. The emergence of these new security arrangements is a manifestation of the rising power's dilemma, for they aim to contain China's expanding national interests. The GSI is thus, from this angle, a response to external pressures. It seeks to transform China's environment in its favor by shouldering more security responsibilities and contesting the security model being built by the US with one that is more favorable to China's development. As opposed to former Chinese security concepts like the NSC and NASC, the GSI goes beyond rhetorical contestation of US security in Asia-Pacific and actually tries to build security architecture there. In this regard, Wang Yi mentioned the “Asian NATO” discourse at the ASEAN Secretariat before proceeding to advocate the principles of the GSI:

There are two completely different trends concerning the future of Asia. One advocates open regionalism, true multilateralism, a development-first approach and mutually beneficial cooperation; it aims to help countries in the region emerge from the pandemic and achieve all-round development as soon as possible. The other pursues a relapse into the obsolete Cold War mentality and closed group politics, and classifies countries in the region based on their values; it attempts to divide the regional economy into different blocs and even apply the NATO approach to Asia-Pacific security.

Wang made similar statements about unilateralism in the Asia Pacific at the 2022 meeting of ESCAP. Li Qiang explicitly said that “we need to implement the GSI, uphold the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, oppose wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction, reject taking sides, bloc confrontation and new Cold War” at the 2023 Boao Forum when talking about the situation in Asia and ASEAN centrality, as opposed to global issues. Though not talking specifically about Asia, in his original GSI speech Xi articulated it as “reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation” and so does the GSI Concept Paper and the “A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions” document in relation to the GSI. Of course, all this is also understandable from the “offensive” school as an attempt to displace US preferences in the region.

5.3 Scope Causes

These two specific causal indicators appear at first to not be global, therefore presenting a disconnect between the pattern in the theory of China's international security conceptual change and expansion. The Ukraine War appears as a regional issue, and one that is not in Asia at that. The “Asian NATO” issue is either a regional Asian issue or a bilateral one between China and the US. However, this understanding is only partial. Without the need to attach oneself to either the “offensive” or “defensive” schools presented above, it is clear that the structural cause of which the specific causes are only manifestations is a global and comprehensive one. Therefore, being causal tributaries of “great changes unseen in a century,” the Ukraine War and the “Asian NATO” discourse are interconnected and global issues indicating structural, not regional or bilateral, rifts, challenges, and pressures. This interrelation is one of the causes of the GSI's global scope and resolves the puzzle of the apparent disconnect between specific causal scopes and international security concept scope.

The second puzzle within scope is the absence of Chinese security interests and, more importantly, capabilities at the global level. This puzzle is resolved by another characteristic of the “great changes” of which the specific causes are manifestations: their comprehensive nature. As has been mentioned, these changes are not merely geopolitical but integrate all manner of areas like, for example, technology

and climate change, which would be considered non-traditional security. For its part, a key component of the GSI is its emphasis on these aspects as central in its conception of security. Furthermore, security in these areas is extremely interconnected and not subject to state boundaries like traditional security issues. Therefore, neither capabilities nor interests are here defined in the same way as traditional security; indeed, neither of those can be circumscribed to states as their only units. This interplay between interconnection of issues and disconnection of boundaries partially explains the global nature of the GSI. The second component of the GSI's global nature with regards to explaining this puzzle also lies in the nature of its content. The leadership and order type represented by the GSI is qualitatively different to that of the US' security order, representing one of "benevolent authority" rather than "hegemony," in Yan Xuetong's terminology. In consequence, its model for action and intervention by its leading power, China, is also different. The GSI does not posit China as a security provider in the way of the US alliance system, for its instruments for providing security, both traditional and non-traditional, are not alliances but partnerships, overlapping institutions, negotiation, and dialogue. Here, China's role is one of mediator and facilitator of dialogue for traditional security disputes, not one of guarantor. Furthermore, it leaves explicit space for regionalized orders to arise. Therefore, the puzzling absence of Chinese global military capabilities and the proposal of the GSI is explained.

6. Conclusion

China proposed the GSI as a result of the complex interplay between the Ukraine War, which indicated the deterioration of the US security order and, therefore, the opportunity for China to develop one, and the emergence of new security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific around the US, prompting China to respond defensively to alleviate its rising power dilemma. These two events are manifestations of "great changes unseen in a century," the structural cause of the GSI. The comprehensive and global nature of this structural cause combined with the leadership model of the GSI both permit and require the global scope of the initiative. The most important task for scholars now that the causes of the GSI are well and scientifically understood are to analyze the theoretical workings of the order the GSI projects for the future, and particularly the dynamics of possible order overlapping between it and the present international order.

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Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data on which the study is based were accessed from a repository and are available for downloading through the following link:

<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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