

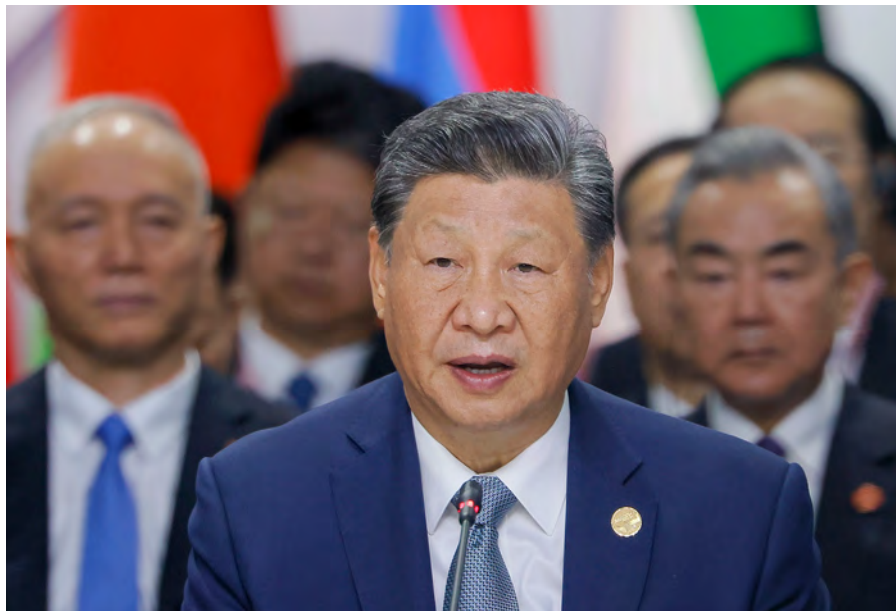
SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 534 | NOVEMBER 2024

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China's Global Security Initiative Takes Shape in Southeast and Central Asia

By Carla Freeman, Bates Gill, and Alison McFarland



Chinese leader Xi Jinping speaks on October 24, 2024, at the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, where China is promoting the GSI. (Photo by Maxim Shemetov/Pool via AP)

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Summary

- Announced in April 2022, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) embodies Xi Jinping's vision for a new international order in which China plays a larger security role. The initiative is not only a rhetorical campaign to win international support but also an organizing framework within which Chinese security actors can deepen concrete security cooperation with other countries.
- China has prioritized its security relations in Southeast and Central Asia, and this is where the GSI has begun to manifest operational features, such as the development of military and security activities.
- Experts and policymakers from those regions highlight the perceived advantages of embracing the GSI. These include closer economic ties with China and direct and indirect assistance from China in confronting an array of traditional and nontraditional security threats.
- However, states in both regions are also wary of growing security dependency on China, which has itself been fomenting regional instabilities—particularly given the uncertainty of the GSI's goals and future course.
- The United States needs to acquire a clear understanding of the GSI's goals and impacts and to recalibrate US policy in Southeast and Central Asia accordingly.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is part of an initiative launched by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to assess China's Global Strategic Initiative (GSI) and its implications for US policy. Based on high-level discussions with interlocutors from Southeast and Central Asia and other field research, the report examines how those two regions have responded to Beijing's efforts to promote the GSI.

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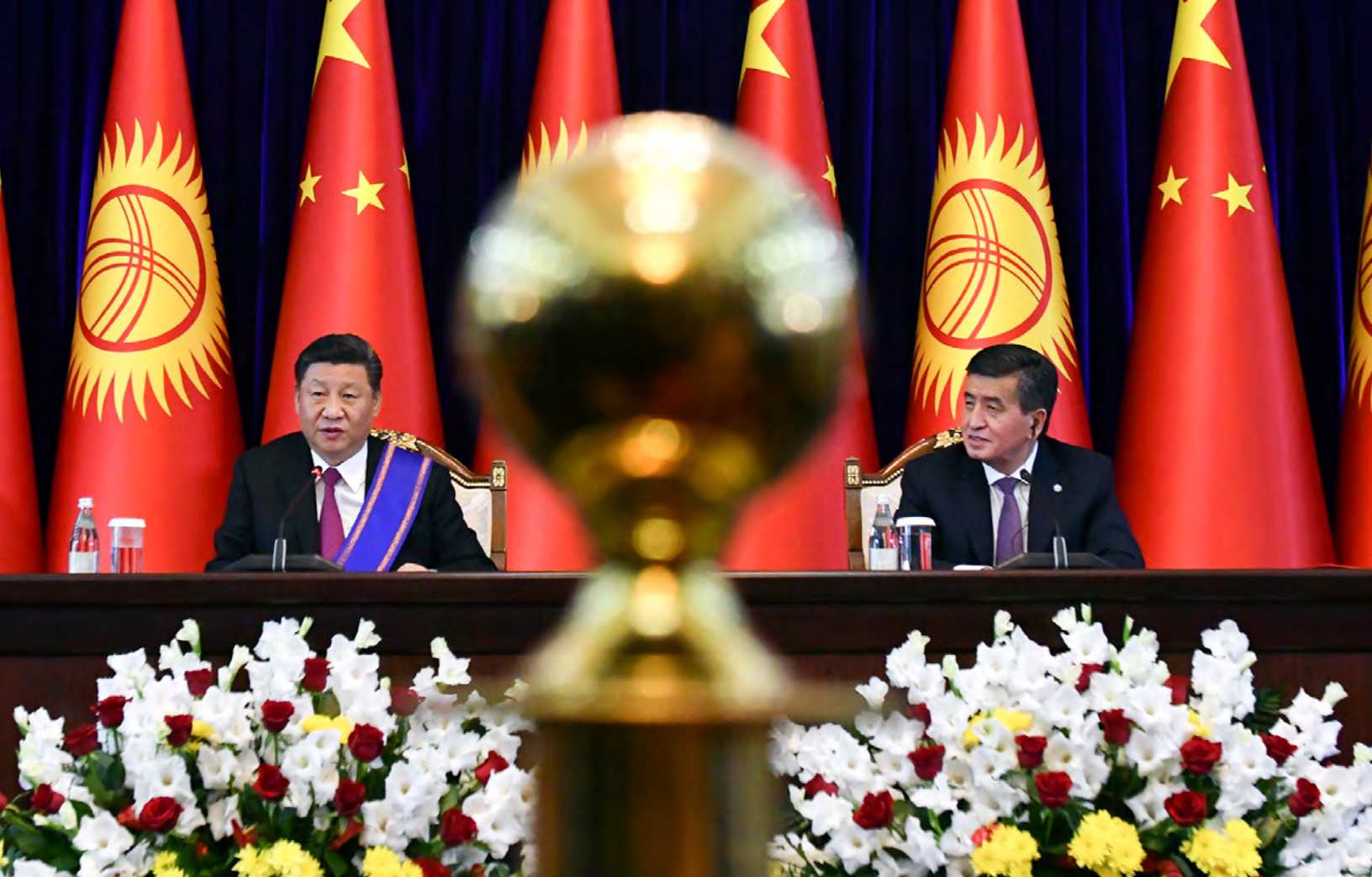
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Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Kyrgyzstan's President Sooronbai Jeenbekov following sideline talks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on June 13, 2019. Nine statements of support for Beijing's Global Security Initiative came from such meetings at the SCO summit in October 2022. (Photo by Vladimir Voronin/AP)

Introduction

Under paramount leader Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (hereafter, the PRC or China) has pursued an ambitious agenda on the international stage with the aim, in Xi's words, of realizing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." This process, according to Xi, has created a "new era" for China and the world. Xi asserts that by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, China will become "a great modern socialist country that leads the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence," championing peaceful development and bringing about a "human community with a shared future."¹

Although it is far from clear whether any of these outcomes will materialize, Beijing's ambitions on the international stage are clearly driven by a desire to reshape elements of global order in ways that are more aligned with PRC national interests and less beholden to US leadership. Efforts to do so have profoundly affected and often disrupted long-established international norms and power dynamics, impacting economic growth, technological competition, diplomatic influence, and regional security.

In recent years, as part of Xi's proactive international agenda, Beijing has devoted substantial diplomatic resources toward promoting new frameworks and initiatives that align more

Since Xi Jinping launched the Global Security Initiative in April 2022, Chinese authorities have sought to elevate it as a vision for a new and improved international order in which China plays a larger security role.

closely with Beijing's interests and vision for the world's future and that reflect China's powerful economic and security capabilities and rising cultural influence. Among the most important of these frameworks is the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议).

Since Xi launched the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022, Chinese authorities have sought to elevate it as a vision for a new and improved international order in which China plays a larger security role. According to a GSI concept paper issued by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2023, the GSI "aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflict." The paper describes traditional and nontraditional security as "intertwined" and lists 20 key areas of focus for the new initiative. These include supporting the United Nations in peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism; promoting arms control and embracing the principle that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought"; supporting climate change cooperation; promoting "sound interaction" among major powers; and resolving "regional hotspot" issues.²

Since the GSI was announced, Xi Jinping and Chinese diplomats have made considerable headway in winning international acknowledgment of the initiative. Yet many countries' leaders continue to refrain from endorsing the GSI and its attendant emphases. One reason for this, particularly in the case of US allies and partners, is that the GSI represents a critique of US global security leadership and its alliance system. These countries do not want to be seen as criticizing US-led security because they are either part of those partnerships themselves or do not want to risk damaging relations with the United States. In addition, some countries find elements of the GSI problematic, most notably its reference to "indivisible security"—the idea that the security of one nation is inseparable from the security of its regional neighbors. Vladimir Putin invoked indivisible security in his attempts to justify his invasion of Ukraine when he claimed that NATO's expansion in central and eastern Europe threatened Russia's security.³ That said, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserts that over 100 countries and international organizations have "appreciated and supported the GSI."⁴ Moreover, the GSI has fully entered China's foreign affairs lexicon and is widely deployed as part of China's bilateral and multilateral engagements, routinely appearing in official readouts of leadership meetings, for example, and frequently referenced in China's official media.⁵

Although the GSI is vague, the years since the GSI's announcement have seen China label an increasing number of its expanding international security activities as part of the initiative. China has used official statements and state media to associate both preexisting and new high-level diplomatic engagements and mechanisms, as well as diverse types of bilateral and multilateral security cooperation, with the GSI. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, alongside Xi Jinping himself—and reinforced by the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party and its affiliated agencies—has been the lead source of Beijing's official communications on the initiative. GSI-linked activities are reportedly guided by China's 2023 Law on Foreign Relations and involve many actors in China's security ecosystem—from the Ministry of Public Security, to the People's Liberation Army, to firms providing various types of security services, among others.⁶

The initiative is thus already not only a rhetorical campaign aimed at widening support for China's global vision and critiquing US global security leadership, but also serves as an organizing framework that allows security actors across China's party-state system to deepen concrete security cooperation with countries beyond its borders. This was clear in a July 2024 report published by the China Institute of International Studies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' think tank, which across more than 100 pages described how China is exporting the GSI as a "public security asset." The report attributes long lists of Chinese diplomatic and security initiatives from multiple actors in the Chinese system to the GSI.⁷

With the GSI's emergence as an important PRC foreign policy platform and the growing weight Beijing is giving this initiative in international engagements, the GSI demands closer scrutiny. In order to gain a greater understanding of the initiative's plans, progress, and prospects, and how they support China's longer-term strategy for a new security order, it is particularly instructive to assess how the GSI is perceived and operationalized within regions and by individual countries.

With these critical points in mind, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has supported a multiyear project to better understand the GSI and its implications for US policy. This work has included field research and high-level discussions with academics, think tank experts, and policymakers, as well as presentations and the publication of reports, among other activities.⁸

This report draws from research on two regions with which China has prioritized its security relations and where it has begun to develop military and security operations that it says are part of the GSI: Southeast Asia (particularly mainland Southeast Asia, also called the Mekong subregion) and Central Asia.⁹ Mainland Southeast Asia and Central Asia are valuable places to study the implementation of the GSI for several reasons. They are key regions for Chinese security interests; indeed, both are among the priorities described in official documents on the GSI. Both regions include countries with which China has resource or territorial disputes, and both are regions with long-standing security ties to other great powers: the United States, in the case of mainland Southeast Asia; and Russia, in the case of Central Asia. Both play a significant role in China's economy, with China and Southeast Asia economically enmeshed as key trading and investment partners, and China diversifying its economic relations with Central Asia, even as its energy and minerals imports from the region rise. Both regions are important zones in China's global infrastructure development strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative. Both regions also share long and relatively porous borders with China, which have been sources of such transnational threats to their security as drug trafficking and other transnational crimes, as well as terrorism and transboundary water disputes, and both are arenas for competition among big powers.

This report begins by describing how regional policymakers and experts interpret China's security role and why, in their view, China's interests in their regions expanding and evolving. The following two sections of the report examine how China is implementing and operationalizing the GSI to address its security priorities in the two regions and how regional observers view its progress. The report concludes by assessing these findings and considering their implications for the GSI's wider impact and for US interests and policy.¹⁰

Regional Explanations of China's Evolving Security Interests

In both Southeast Asia and Central Asia, region-based officials and experts observe an expansion of PRC security interests as part of an ongoing and increasing “securitization” of China’s foreign policy. This is especially the case since the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress, held in October 2022, which made clear that increasing and modernizing China’s capacity to ensure stability and security at home and secure its expanding interests abroad would be a priority going forward.

In the case of China’s specific relationships with regions along its borders, there is a discernible shift in emphasis—away from China’s historical promotion of economic development as the principal source of domestic stability in its regional neighborhood and toward a concern with the internal and regime security of its neighbors. Beijing now appears prepared to use its advanced and wide-ranging security capabilities to proactively engage countries across its borders in reducing the regional risks posed by its neighbors’ security problems. Observers point to a number of reasons for this, including China’s geostrategic rivalry with the United States; its expansive global and regional economic interests, including ensuring its access to energy, raw materials, and new markets; and the need to safeguard trade corridors to its west and south that are less vulnerable to blockades and conflict than its eastern maritime approaches.

In mainland Southeast Asia, Beijing has numerous security concerns. China’s multiple territorial disputes in the South China Sea are a key—perhaps even a “core”—security challenge for Beijing and impact how Southeast Asian countries perceive and respond to PRC ambitions.¹¹ In addition, the ongoing civil conflicts in Myanmar, especially those affecting security along the China-Myanmar border that threaten China’s homeland and PRC infrastructure investments in Myanmar, are a major concern.¹²

However, it is nontraditional security challenges that have emerged as prominent concerns for China in the region, including cybercrime, money laundering, unregulated gambling, and illicit trafficking in persons, drugs, and weapons—all of which increasingly involve Chinese citizens as both perpetrators and victims.¹³ Not all of China’s activities in response to these challenges are new: China has been expanding cooperation with counterparts in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to combat them for more than a decade. For example, it has conducted a range of cross-border law enforcement activities in mainland Southeast Asia, including joint patrol missions along the Mekong River with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand since 2011.¹⁴ One key development was the establishment by the PRC in December 2017, in cooperation with Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, of the Lancang-Mekong River Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center. (The Mekong River is called the Lancang in China.) According to Chinese sources, the center conducts five key tasks, including training and other professional exchanges, joint patrols, joint operations and investigations, maintaining a criminal information database, and intelligence sharing. In 2017, through Operation Safe Passage, the center’s partners reportedly resolved some 10,224 drug cases, arrested more than 15,000

criminal suspects, and seized 8.4 tons of narcotics and more than 88 million methamphetamine tablets.¹⁵ According to its website, the center continues to carry out a variety of activities, including joint patrols along the Lancang-Mekong by law enforcement agencies as well as law enforcement capacity building. This capacity building can take many forms, ranging from holding anti-telecom fraud seminars with officials from Myanmar to teaching Chinese to members of the Thai government's departments of police, immigration, and anti-money laundering.¹⁶

In Central Asia, China's security concerns traditionally have focused on what official statements call the "three evils" or "three forces" (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism) as they pertain to Uyghur and other Muslim minorities *within* China.¹⁷ Today, however, Central Asian observers find that China appears more confident about the situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the northwestern part of the country and in other traditionally Muslim areas in China, even to the point of encouraging greater economic and cultural exchange between Xinjiang and its Central Asian neighbors. Alongside this shift, China is now more concerned about conflict, terrorism, and other sources of instability arising in the region outside of China and along its borders, including in Afghanistan, Central Asian countries, Pakistan, and Russia. Central Asian experts also point to what one interlocutor described as the "commercialization" of Chinese security, which can be seen in an emphasis on both protecting Chinese investments in the region from terrorist attacks and exporting Chinese security products—such as "safe city" video surveillance equipment and other networked public security technologies—to the region.

In discussions for this report, officials and experts in mainland Southeast and Central Asia emphasized how China's security interests are shaped and constrained by major external powers, which in turn influences their own regions' security engagement with China. In Southeast Asia, the United States looms large because of its formal alliances or robust security relationships with several countries in the region—most prominently, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, as well as with Vietnam on some issues. Other US allies in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, are also closely engaged with the region as economic, diplomatic, and security partners. These relationships complicate and constrain China's ability to become a more influential security actor in Southeast Asia.

Russia continues to dominate Central Asia as the most important external regional player in terms of security. It remains the most consequential security presence in the region, maintaining military testing ranges (in Kazakhstan), military bases (in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and space-related facilities (in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan). It is also by far the largest provider of major weapons to Central Asian countries. Moreover, for historical and practical reasons, including the seven decades when Central Asian states were part of the Soviet Union and fully integrated into the Soviet defense structure, they continue to look to Russia, not China, as the preferred partner to meet their security needs. As a result, as Beijing seeks to expand its security influence in Central Asia, it must tread cautiously.

As China seeks to navigate these complex environments to meet its own evolving security interests, it is increasing its role in both regional and subregional multilateralism. It is using the Sino-centric multilateral mechanisms it has developed to set or influence regional agendas and ensure its priorities are addressed. In Southeast Asia, these include the array of high-level China-ASEAN processes related to security.¹⁸ The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) is



Lt. Gen. Jia Jian Cheng, left, of China's People Liberation Army, and Cambodian Defense Minister Gen. Tea Seiha at the Golden Dragon military exercise in Cambodia on May 30, 2024. Many recent cooperative activities and exchanges on security issues in Southeast and Central Asia are now associated with the Global Security Initiative. (Photo by Heng Sinith/AP)

another such forum; it was proposed by China in 2014 and launched in 2016 with a leaders' summit. The LMC brings together the PRC and the five mainland Southeast Asian countries—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—through which the Mekong River flows. In 2017, an LMC Secretariat was established in Beijing within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to fund, implement, and oversee cooperation with the five Mekong River countries across political, security, economic, development, and sociocultural issues.¹⁹ The LMC is driven by China and operates independently of ASEAN and other ASEAN-China mechanisms, although its inaugural leaders' meeting declaration establishes that it will “tally” with ASEAN's priorities for community building.²⁰

For Beijing's regional engagement in Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remains a key platform. China has interacted with the region on security issues through the SCO for decades. Since it was established by China and Russia in 2001, the SCO has provided a mechanism through which China and Russia can conduct cooperative relations with Central Asian states while enabling Russia to sustain its dominance as the region's leading military-security presence.

In October 2022, Xi Jinping chose Central Asia for his first foreign trip since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, attending the SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The Chinese leader took full advantage of the opportunity to promote the GSI, featuring it in his formal remarks as

well as during the bilateral meetings held on the summit's sidelines. Nine joint statements mentioning the initiative came out of those 11 meetings.²¹

More recently, Chinese officials have associated the GSI with the C5+China forum, established in 2020. The C5+China brings together Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China. It held its first leaders' summit in May 2023, and in March 2024 established a formal secretariat in the western city of Xi'an, in China's Shaanxi Province. Many experts in Central Asia assess the emergence of the C5+China as a means for Beijing to strengthen ties to the region via an institution that does *not* include Russia. A second impetus they identify for Beijing's enthusiasm for the C5+China mechanism has to do with the SCO's recent expansion to include Belarus, India, Iran, and Pakistan, which has diluted the organization's previous focus on Central Asia. Some interlocutors in the region perceive Beijing's interest in the SCO and the SCO's Regional Antiterrorism Structure declining, a trend they expect to continue as China expands security arrangements directed through the C5+China and bilaterally. As discussed further below, China has held up the GSI as a way of strengthening cooperation on counterterrorism and several other global security challenges (climate change, for example) via the SCO and the closely related Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). In contrast, Beijing has emphasized defense against external interference as one of its security cooperation priorities through the C5+China grouping.

Implementing the GSI in Southeast and Central Asia

As China's security interests in Southeast and Central Asia have grown, China has been positioning itself as a regional security provider, increasingly labeling its activities with the GSI moniker. (Table 1 highlights key points in the rollout of the GSI to date.) Many recent cooperative activities and exchanges on security issues with the two regions are now associated with the GSI. These include senior-level consultations between domestic security and law enforcement officials and military-to-military diplomacy. In addition, since the launch of the GSI, China has increased training opportunities in China and at home for military, police, counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and other security-related and law enforcement personnel from these regions. It has also expanded the export of equipment and technologies for policing, internal security, and surveillance, including safe cities platforms; and it has expanded the provision of private security contractors to protect PRC-invested facilities and infrastructure.

Today, China places these kinds of activities under the GSI umbrella. In the GSI concept paper, for example, the LMC mechanism is specifically named as a "pilot zone" intended to foster cooperation in countering nontraditional security challenges. In a 2024 analysis of the creation and future prospects of the Lancang-Mekong River Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center, the two authors, both from the Chinese People's Public Security University, describe the center as a concrete example of the GSI in action that contributes to Beijing's long-term goal of "building a community of shared future for mankind."²²

**TABLE 1. ROLLOUT OF THE GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE, SELECT EVENTS
APRIL 2022–JULY 2024**

Date	Event
April 21, 2022	Xi Jinping proposes the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia.
July 26, 2022	Indonesia “takes note” of the GSI.
September 14, 2022	Kazakhstan “is willing to actively cooperate” to implement the GSI.
September 15, 2022	Uzbekistan “supports” the GSI and “is willing to carry on exchanges and cooperation” within the GSI mechanism. Turkmenistan supports “a series of major initiatives put forward by China.”
September 28, 2022	Laos “attaches great importance to” Chinese initiatives, including the GSI.
November 2, 2022	Vietnam “recognizes” China’s GSI.
November 11, 2022	Cambodia “supports China’s proposal” of the GSI. Leaders at the ASEAN-China summit “took note” of the GSI.
November 17, 2022	Indonesia agrees “to enhance communication and explore efforts in potential cooperation” on the GSI.
November 19, 2022	Thailand “will explore cooperation under the framework of the GSI.”
January 5, 2023	The Philippines agrees to “explore possible cooperation for mutual benefit regarding” the GSI.
January 6, 2023	Turkmenistan is “determined to jointly promote the implementation of” the GSI with China.
February 11, 2023	In a joint PRC-Cambodia statement, “Cambodia supports China’s proposal of the Global Security Initiative.”
February 21, 2023	Publication of the GSI concept paper
May 17, 2023	Kazakhstan “supports” the GSI.
May 18, 2023	Kyrgyzstan “supports,” Tajikistan “supports,” and Uzbekistan is “ready to . . . actively implement” the GSI.
May 18–19, 2023	Xi Jinping highlights security cooperation and references the GSI at the Xi’an China–Central Asia Summit.
July 1, 2023	Law of the PRC on Foreign Relations enacted; Chapter 3, Article 18, lists implementing the GSI as a “goal and task” of China’s foreign relations.
September 6, 2023	Leaders at the ASEAN-China summit “took note” of the GSI.
December 13, 2023	“The Vietnamese side welcomes and supports” the GSI.
December 27–28, 2023	Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs includes implementing the GSI as part of the “strategic guidance for building a community with a shared future for mankind.”
March 11, 2024	Five-Year Plan of Action on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (2023–2027) calls for enhanced cooperation in law enforcement and justice, as well as in nontraditional security areas, to complement the work of the GSI.
March 30, 2024	Central Asia–China Secretariat in Xi’an established.
July 19, 2024	Launch of the Center for Global Security Initiative Studies and release of “Report on the Implementation Progress of the Global Security Initiative.”

Note: Quotations are from official government statements and press releases.

In addition, the GSI concept paper specifically identifies the SCO, CICA, and C5+China forums as “platforms and mechanisms of cooperation” for the initiative.²³ At the SCO summit in September 2022, Xi Jinping called on the platform’s member states to help implement the GSI, stating that China would provide training for 2,000 law enforcement personnel.²⁴ Xi has also explicitly linked the GSI to the work of the C5+China mechanism, saying to his five Central Asian counterparts:

It is important that we act on the Global Security Initiative, and stand firm against external attempts to interfere in domestic affairs of regional countries or instigate color revolutions [i.e., protest movements that fuel regime change]. We should remain zero-tolerant to the three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and strive to resolve security conundrums in the region.²⁵

The GSI is also associated with bilateral security cooperation between China and countries in both regions. For example, in a 2023 joint PRC-Cambodia statement in which Cambodia reiterated its support for the GSI and China’s effort to transform global security governance, the two countries agreed to extensive security cooperation. This included strengthening bilateral law enforcement cooperation, including in countering transnational crime, terrorism, human trafficking, cross-border gambling, and telecommunications fraud; preventing color revolutions; and bolstering the China-Cambodia Law Enforcement Cooperation and Coordination Office in Phnom Penh.²⁶ Similarly, a 2023 joint statement issued by Tajikistan and China that declares Tajikistan’s support for the GSI also says that the “law enforcement and security agencies of the two countries will continue to conduct joint anti-terrorism exercises.”²⁷

Of course, the implementation of the GSI is still very new and sits within the larger context of increasing Chinese security activities in these two regions. Many of these activities began prior to the GSI’s introduction and are not yet explicitly linked to the initiative. China’s engagement with Cambodia and Tajikistan are notable examples in their respective regions due to PRC involvement in military bases in each country (see page 12). Beijing’s funding of Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base, which was first reported in 2019, does not appear to be tied to the GSI in official statements but is connected to the initiative in a *China Daily* article that quotes a Cambodian think tank expert describing the GSI as a “complementary security watchdog” to the United Nations Security Council.²⁸ Similarly, Chinese basing activities along Tajikistan’s border, which were also reported in 2019 but may have begun as early as 2016, have not been officially tied to the GSI.²⁹ However, as noted above, border checks and counterterrorism cooperation have been mentioned in documents touching on the GSI; Central Asian interlocutors also pointed to China’s border security cooperation with Tajikistan, including its involvement with bases, as potentially being part of the GSI.

Assessing the extent and impact of China’s security activities under the GSI will take time. As one Uzbek expert observed, when the Belt and Road Initiative was first launched (in 2013), it was difficult to understand what it entailed, and even now it can be unclear which investments are part of the Belt and Road Initiative and which are not. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand how the GSI can be employed as a tool to further China’s security interests in these regions. As a Kazakh expert remarked, the GSI may be the first step to getting countries to accept China’s leading role in this arena.

China's secret basing activities

One significant indication of China's increasing security presence in Southeast and Central Asia has been its involvement in military bases in Cambodia and Tajikistan. In Cambodia, Beijing is funding the upgrade of the Ream Naval Base, which sits to the west of the South China Sea in the Gulf of Thailand. In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that China and Cambodia had signed a secret agreement to allow the Chinese military to use the facility for 30 years; three years later, the *Washington Post* stated that China was building a facility on the northern part of the base for the exclusive use of its own military.^a Beijing and Phnom Penh have denied these claims, with Cambodian officials asserting that the agreement with China would not violate Cambodia's constitution, which prohibits foreign military bases.^b

Nevertheless, concerns have continued to mount, especially since December 2023, when Chinese naval ships were first stationed at Ream. Cambodian defense minister Tea Seiha visited the warships in early December 2023 and stated in a Facebook post that the ships were there as part of a training exercise with the Cambodian navy.^c Although the two ships were reported to have left the base in January 2024, they were seen there in March, with research by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative confirming that the ships had not left Ream.^d In July 2024, two new ships arrived to replace the ones that had been docked since December, the exchange being part of the agreement to train the Cambodian navy, according to Defense Ministry spokesperson Chhum Socheat.^e

In the case of Tajikistan, the *Washington Post* reported in 2019 on the presence of Chinese troops at a military base along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan in the Murghab region.^f Both Chinese and Tajik governments have denied the presence of Chinese troops at the base, with Tajik officials asserting that Gerry Shih, the journalist who first reported on it, had misidentified what was actually a Tajik border post.^g However, other outlets, including Radio Free Europe and Iran International, reported that locals living near the facility had confirmed the presence of Chinese personnel.^h

Furthermore, the 2020 edition of the US Department of Defense's annual report on Chinese military power declared that China's People's Armed Police have likely patrolled the border region connecting Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and China since 2016.ⁱ In October 2021, Tajikistan approved the construction of a new facility in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province that would be owned by the Interior Ministry's Rapid Reaction Group and would be funded by China. Radio Free Asia also reported that it had seen a communiqué in which the Tajik government offered to transfer full control of the Murghab base to the PRC "and waive any future rent in exchange for military aid from China."^j

Note: See page 24 for citations.

Regional Assessments of the GSI

China's historical and contemporary geopolitical relationships with mainland Southeast and Central Asia form the foundation on which the fortunes of China's regional security ambitions will rise or fall. However, it is important to stress that these relationships are complex and differ considerably across strategic, political, ethnic, religious, and economic dimensions. Within the regions, individual countries' relations with China vary widely. Both Southeast Asia and Central Asia have millennia-long histories of engagement with their Chinese neighbor, including periods of imperial hegemony. These memories still resonate and are a source of wariness and recurrent anti-China sentiment. As one Uzbek official said, "There is a long and contradictory history with China, and the negatives are well known."

That said, with some exceptions, the views expressed about China by experts in both mainland Southeast Asia and Central Asia were largely positive. More benefits were seen as coming from economic relations with China than costs. Experts in mainland Southeast Asia described how their governments have leaned into closer political and economic relations with China and by and large welcome Chinese investment and trade. China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, and trade between the two has expanded more than fourfold since then; by 2020, ASEAN had become China's largest trading partner.³⁰ In Central Asia, China has overtaken Russia's traditional role as the leading foreign economic partner of Central Asian states. Landlocked states in the region particularly appreciate the connections to external markets (including China's domestic market), job creation, and the possibilities of greater regional economic integration that Chinese investments in transport and communications infrastructure can generate.

Among the countries in mainland Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand seem most comfortable with the GSI concept, and all three governments have officially expressed support for the initiative.³¹ One reason for this, according to interlocutors from the region, is that there is much in the GSI's rhetoric that echoes the language of the ASEAN charter, including principles of "non-interference" and "shared destiny." Noting how active China has been in promoting the GSI in the region, one Thai academic suggested that Beijing is aiming to "turn Southeast Asia into a testing zone for China's global initiative." If the GSI can deliver on confronting the challenges posed by illicit trafficking, cyber scamming, and other forms of international crime, the interlocutors assessed that Southeast Asian governments would welcome it, especially those that lack the resources to effectively combat these problems themselves.

Beneath the surface, however, skepticism persists in Southeast Asia about the GSI and China's security role in the region, even among states without maritime tensions with China. Interlocutors observed that although the initiative may be attractive to political elites who want to address domestic security challenges, it may also strengthen nondemocratic forces in the region. With respect to Myanmar, where the ruling junta has voiced support for the GSI, some scholars expressed concern: by engaging with the junta on security matters through the GSI, China could legitimize the regime.³² One interlocutor speculated that Beijing and Chinese businesses could use the GSI to interfere in domestic politics to their advantage, which could include supporting the junta to protect Beijing's interests. Amid recognition that the GSI could increase the capacity

of Southeast Asian states to combat nontraditional security challenges, there was also concern about how China might influence a wide range of regional norms. For instance, while there was interest in China's help in combatting cybercrime, interlocutors expressed concerns about Beijing promoting its own cybersecurity and data governance standards.

Additionally, many experts interviewed for this report raised concerns about the potential for growing security dependence on China, which could divert attention away from territorial and jurisdictional disputes in the South China Sea and the role that Chinese criminal networks and other nonstate actors play in fomenting instabilities in the region. Reflective of the mixed reaction to the GSI within Southeast Asia as a whole, even within official circles, the ASEAN chairman's statements coming out of the 2022 and 2023 ASEAN-China summits were guarded, saying only that the gathered leaders "took note" of the GSI and "looked forward to further details."³³

According to regional experts, Vietnam's government is particularly wary of the initiative. This circumspection stems in large part from the GSI's emphasis on the concept of indivisible security, one of the formal pretexts both Moscow and Beijing have used to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Vietnam is also leery of engaging China on GSI projects in relation to cybersecurity or the security of critical infrastructure. Higher-level concerns come into play as well. As one senior Vietnamese expert said, China is seeking to change the "strategic traditions" of Southeast Asia from "rely on China for economics, rely on the United States for security" to relying on China for both economics and security. Even so, in a joint statement issued during Xi Jinping's state visit to Vietnam in December 2023, the Vietnamese side stated that it "welcomes and supports" the GSI and announced enhanced security, defense, intelligence, and law enforcement cooperation with China, including cooperation to "counter interference" and prevent "peaceful evolution," color revolutions, and "separatism by hostile reactionary forces."³⁴

In Central Asia, there is a similar diversity of opinion about the GSI. At the official level, leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan conveyed statements formally endorsing the GSI at the May 2023 C5+China summit. During discussions for this report, Central Asian officials and experts expressed a general acceptance of the GSI, stating that they do not object to its principles and would welcome similar initiatives by other countries. However, many interlocutors also expressed concerns about the lack of clarity over what the GSI consists of beyond a criticism of the West and said that any practical implementation would depend on the specific proposals and would have to be aligned with their respective country's interests.

Interviewees in both regions generally did not perceive endorsement of the GSI by regional governments as implying potential constraints on their security options, asserting that participating in the initiative would not preclude them from engaging with other security partners. However, some interlocutors did assess the GSI as a potential risk for the region. One Kazakh expert described it as a reflection of China going back to building an "empire-like" relationship with the rest of the world, a sentiment echoed by other interlocutors in discussions across the region. That said, nongovernmental experts noted that relations between their governments and Beijing on nontraditional security issues were generally aligned and hence conducive to GSI objectives, although not without tensions (such as the issue of China's water diversions and their impact on Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan). These interlocutors were also more likely to express concern

A train carrying containers from China crosses the Kazakh border in Khorgos, Kazakhstan, on March 18, 2024. China has overtaken Russia's traditional role as the leading foreign economic partner of Central Asian states. (Photo by Chang W. Lee/New York Times)

that China's growing security presence in Central Asia would foster more backsliding on democracy, civil society development, and the rule of law.

It was clear from discussions, however, that Central Asia has supported China's efforts to address potential terrorist threats to the region, specifically through its engagement with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. Some experts observed that following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a growing security role for China in Central Asia could complement and "softly" counterbalance Russia's long-standing security influence. None saw Russia as anything but the region's top security partner, however, viewing China as unlikely—and unwilling—to displace it. Nevertheless, with Moscow seen as a less reliable security actor following its invasion of Ukraine, and with fears—especially in Kazakhstan—of Russian irredentism and broader regional concerns over Russia's crumbling relationship with the West, stronger security ties with China have enhanced appeal.

In this context, Xi Jinping's remarks during a state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022 still resonate in the region. Xi said, "No matter how the international situation changes, we will continue to strongly support Kazakhstan in defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity . . . and oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country."³⁵ Coming several months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Xi's words were welcomed by Central Asian experts in Kazakhstan and repeatedly cited as evidence of the positive security role China could play in the region. Xi reiterated this language in a signed article issued just before his summit meeting in Astana with Kazakh leader Kassim-Jomart Tokayev in July 2024.³⁶



Prospects for the GSI and US Policy Implications

Discussions with regional experts leave no doubt that Beijing will continue to invest in promoting the GSI as a key element of its international strategy and diplomatic engagement multilaterally, bilaterally, and unilaterally. In July 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a new Center for Global Security Initiative Studies, to be housed within the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS) think tank. The launch event included the issuance of a lengthy report outlining the progress of the GSI to date.³⁷

In remarks at the launch event, China's vice foreign minister, Chen Xiaodong, spoke about GSI implementation (captured in much greater detail in the CIIS report) while laying out an expansive vision for the GSI's future. Chen discussed the GSI in the context of a wide range of activities, from what he called "security-related exchanges and cooperation" under various regional frameworks; to peacekeeping operations; to new minilaterals such as cooperation among China, Pakistan, and Iran; to food security and disaster relief initiatives. Among the entities that he identified as important elements of the GSI were both new China-led peace and security forums in Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands, and established groupings, including the SCO, the BRICS, and other dialogue platforms, such as the Beijing Xiangshan Forum and the Global Public Security Forum (also sometimes referred to as the Lianyungang Forum). Chen also linked Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, and Mali to the GSI. In summarizing his view of and expectations for the initiative, he stated, "It is another global public good China provides for the world, and a concrete step in pursuing the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind in the field of security which charts the course toward lasting peace and universal security of human society."³⁸

Beijing's vision and expectations for the GSI; the political, diplomatic, and financial resources that have been devoted to it; and the expanding pipeline of GSI-related outputs all explain why the GSI warrants greater attention on the part of the US policy community. Three key policy implications stand out.

The first of these is straightforward and unmistakable: **The GSI is an increasingly important element of PRC foreign policy, and the United States should revise its own policy to acknowledge and respond to that fact.** While the initiative is still in its early stages of development, China is moving swiftly toward promoting security cooperation under the GSI banner through bilateral diplomacy and multilateral structures. US policymakers should be aware of the multiple ways in which the GSI serves China's national interests.

To begin with, at the strategic level, the GSI provides a conceptual framework that China can leverage to socialize the world beyond its borders to the idea of China as a provider of regional and global security goods. In this respect, the GSI harkens back to the "peaceful rise" narrative of the early 2000s, when, under Hu Jintao's leadership, China sought to mitigate concerns that its growing economic, political, and military power were contributing to "security dilemma" dynamics" in Asia.³⁹ In the GSI framing, China is not only a capable provider, but also—given that

the GSI attributes current international insecurity to the United States and its alliance system—a necessary provider of global security goods.

Second, China deploys the GSI’s public goods logic to operationalize concrete international security activities that it associates with the initiative. Many of these activities are not new and were underway prior to the launch of the GSI in 2022; others are more recent in their implementation. Irrespective of when these activities were first launched, they are now grouped together under the GSI umbrella, and the initiative functions as a way to justify and normalize China’s widening international security footprint as it grapples with a growing array of challenges to its national security interests. In this respect, Beijing also values the GSI as a vehicle for helping protect its expanding international interests, including through the commercial export of China’s security-related goods and services.

Third, the GSI offers a channel through which Beijing promotes international political and security arrangements that are more aligned with PRC interests than those supported by the United States and its allies. China will use the GSI to integrate its security preferences into established global and regional multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and ASEAN. With regard to the latter, for example, China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, has argued that the GSI will help preserve “the centrality of ASEAN in the regional framework” and prevent “the use of military alliances to piece together an Asia-Pacific version of NATO,” contending that the US Indo-Pacific strategy and alliance relationships will “split the region.”⁴⁰ China will also use the initiative to frame new commitments through the Sino-centric multilateral entities it has developed, such as the SCO and BRICS, as well as through newer, more regionally focused mechanisms, such as the LMC and the C5+China. The United States should be sensitive to the likely proliferation of new Sino-centric groupings and their impacts on US regional objectives and interests.

Fourth, Beijing is increasingly branding or rebranding diplomatic and security cooperation activities within its bilateral “partnership relationships” as belonging to the GSI. This rebranding includes an emphasis on China’s high-level diplomacy on international conflicts, as in the cases of its forays into Middle East diplomacy and addressing such transnational nontraditional security challenges as counternarcotics and the networks of scam centers in mainland Southeast Asia.

Fifth, China has invoked the GSI to advance such principles as indivisible security and noninterference in internal affairs, counterposing those to, in Xi’s words, “the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction.”⁴¹ The link made in the CIIS report between the GSI and the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, which overwhelmingly consists of authoritarian states, indicates the GSI will be employed to challenge international principles, such as the United Nations’ “responsibility to protect,” and to equate universalism with unilateralism. This link also illustrates the GSI’s appeal to illiberal governments as a means to strengthen their grip on power. In this respect, the initiative offers Beijing political cover for providing security tools that reinforce authoritarianism and contribute to backsliding on political reform, civil society development, and the rule of law.

The second policy implication for the United States is that **the GSI resonates with China’s international partners, although they do have some reservations.** The rhetoric Beijing uses to promote the GSI appeals to many in the Global South, particularly insofar as the initiative is said to embrace and advance principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, internal stability,



Vietnamese Defense Minister Gen. Phan Van Giang, left, at the Pentagon on September 9, 2024. In Southeast Asia, governments have many prospective security partners in addition to China, including Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States. (Photo by Kevin Wolf/AP)

the right of countries to pursue their own development paths, and the realization of a more just and equitable international system. Officials and experts in mainland Southeast and Central Asia see the GSI as a serious effort by China with potentially significant regional, and perhaps global, impact. Furthermore, they understand that the GSI marks a shift in Beijing's foreign policy away from its historic emphasis on economic engagement and toward promoting various types of security cooperation with other states.

In mainland Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and elsewhere around the globe, the GSI provides an often-effective messaging framework for Beijing to contrast its approach to international security with the approaches favored by Western countries, especially the United States. Regional elites in mainland Southeast Asia and Central Asia view the GSI as aimed at challenging US global security leadership and asserting China's own preferences for an alternative order while countering perceived threats from the United States on its periphery.

Some local observers find that China's growing role in security in their regions is already bolstering the capabilities of their authoritarian governments to crack down on domestic critics, including civil society organizations. China's promotion of the GSI in Southeast and Central Asia thus not only functions to normalize a more prominent role for China in bilateral and regional security cooperation but also poses a challenge to US efforts to prevent democratic backsliding.

Regional elites further understand the GSI as an instrument that China can use in many types of multilateral and bilateral settings to promote policies to reduce international, and particularly cross-border, security risks to China, protect Chinese investments and citizens in the regions, and contribute to improving regional security. For example, in Central Asia, where governments are concerned about color revolutions and terrorist activity from abroad, including from Afghanistan, China is an important source of security technology and counterterrorism cooperation under the GSI banner. China's value as a source of security has also risen amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, which has both drawn Moscow's gaze away from the region as a whole and caused a reassessment in Central Asian capitals of Russian capabilities and intentions.

In mainland Southeast Asia, transnational crime and the challenges it poses to the capacity of states in the region is a critically important issue. As a result, as our interlocutors have described, China's cooperation on countering criminal activities is welcomed. This includes projects such as Safe Lancang Mekong Action, launched under the auspices of the LMC, and efforts to force the closure of criminal enclaves often connected to Chinese criminal syndicates that host scam centers, which are magnets for human and narcotics trafficking.

However, China faces a complex international environment that will complicate and constrain its security interests, including its advancement of the GSI. On the one hand, the United States has demonstrated marked success bolstering and expanding alliances and security partnerships in response to China's more proactive assertion of its security interests. In addition, many countries are pursuing "multi-vector" foreign policies, diversifying diplomatic and security ties to avoid becoming overly dependent on any one major power. On the other hand, some regions have long-standing ties with great powers other than China. In Central Asia, for example, Moscow's continuing influence, especially in terms of military power and defense ties, means China will have difficulty gaining traction in these areas. Similar challenges confront China in Southeast Asia, where regional governments have many other prospective security partners—not only the United States but also Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey, among others.

The third implication for US policymaking is perhaps counterintuitive—namely, that **the GSI reveals opportunities for more engagement for the United States in mainland Southeast Asia and in Central Asia**. It is important not to dismiss the GSI as merely an exercise in discrediting the United States and instead to recognize that it is seen in some quarters as bringing real benefits. In response to Beijing's efforts to give regional actors concrete reasons to support the initiative, the United States should redouble its engagement and seek new opportunities for security cooperation in mainland Southeast Asia and in Central Asia. Overall, China's GSI push has not diminished interest among countries in either region in cooperating on security with the United States. Not all US policies are welcomed, but the United States remains an appealing partner among regional elites.

There is an openness to and desire for increased US engagement in both Southeast and Central Asia, particularly as countries in the two regions seek to avoid overdependence on China. Southeast Asian interlocutors noted that in the larger context of US-China rivalry, small and medium powers in Southeast Asia can potentially benefit from "healthy competition" between the two powers. In Central Asia, the influence of Russia creates a different dynamic, with one Uzbek former official stating that the real split in Central Asia is not between China and the West

Regional elites see benefits in the United States, which is powerful but is not a threat. However, there is also pessimism in both regions about Washington's ability to effectively respond to these opportunities.

or between China and Russia, *but between Russia and the West*. Central Asian states share a desire to diversify away from Russia, but that does not automatically mean that they want to replace Russia with China; there is real and significant interest in engaging with the West. In this context, Washington needs to make more of the US C5+1 diplomatic platform (Washington's mechanism for engaging the five

Central Asian governments) and the region's preference for multi-vector diplomacy.

This desire to engage with multiple powers opens opportunities for the United States if it chooses to take them. Regional elites see benefits in engaging with the United States, which is powerful but is not a threat.⁴² However, there is also pessimism about Washington's ability to effectively respond to these opportunities. Many interlocutors in Central Asia commented that the region is not a priority for the United States, with some Kyrgyz interviewees pointing to the cancelation of the US-Kyrgyzstan cooperation framework and the inclusion of Kyrgyzstan among "banned" Muslim countries as examples, describing the US C5+1 as "damage control." In Southeast Asia, there was particular concern among Cambodian experts about Washington's willingness to deepen engagement with Phnom Penh. Interlocutors from both regions felt that without strong US engagement, increasing ties with China was the only option available. Although Central Asian experts did not think that deepening cooperation with China would prevent their governments from engaging with the United States, they acknowledged that China's efforts to create institutions and promote regional integration that went through China could eventually lead to US exclusion.

Interlocutors from both regions suggested a wide range of areas for increased US involvement, including trade, investment, technology, and education and training. They also pointed to nontraditional security issues such as cybersecurity and disinformation management as well as resource security as having potential for further cooperation. Experts from mainland Southeast Asia identified human and drug trafficking as areas for potential cooperation. A Thai academic suggested that the United States should focus on engaging with the "next generation" of officials, those aged between 35 and 45. Central Asian interviewees mentioned education and civil society as areas for further US engagement.

Regional experts suggested that the United States could also do more with like-minded partners, including Japan and South Korea, who play substantial economic roles and whose engagement is attractive to both regions. The experts suggested that Washington should look for ways to work cooperatively in areas such as nontraditional security, as it has on certain infrastructure projects—the US-Japan Mekong power cooperation was cited as an example.

Experts welcomed US support for their own regions' efforts to deepen regional integration and autonomy. In Southeast Asia, opportunities exist to expand US ties to the region through ASEAN channels at a time when ASEAN is strained by South China Sea tensions. In Central Asia, there is an understanding in regional capitals that countries in the region are served by improved policy coordination, an understanding demonstrated by the appearance of all five Central Asian countries' heads of state at the United Nations in September 2023. Interlocutors suggested that attendance by the new US president at the major ASEAN-centered summit

events in the region, such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum at the end of 2025, along with continued convening of the US-ASEAN Summit and the C5+1 would be powerful signals of US support to regional processes.



China is making progress in its use of the GSI as a framework for deepening security relations with mainland Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Although governments in both regions generally prefer an approach to regional security that is centered on regional cooperation and that allows them to engage with multiple partners, the GSI has several appealing attributes: It is a framework through which to acquire domestic and international security goods in the context of China's critical importance as a bilateral and regional economic partner. Its emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and noninterference and its critique of hegemonism resonate at the bilateral level with states that see the need for a powerful security partner but continue to wrestle with the legacy of colonialism and identify with the developing world. To an audience of emerging and developing economies, the GSI casts China as a benign alternative to the United States and the West, a power that offers new solutions to difficult or emerging security challenges for a "shared future" without the selectivity of an alliance relationship.

Research for this report suggests that the GSI appears to be helping China construct security ties in both mainland Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Whether by increasing the domestic security capabilities of neighboring states through the provision of equipment, training, and military and police cooperation or by deploying China's own resources and personnel to combat transnational crime, these ties allow China to exert far more direct influence on security challenges and attendant dynamics beyond its borders than in the past.

At the same time, the GSI faces considerable skepticism in the two regions. China has disputes not only with many of its neighbors over territorial borders and resources—issues that are of elemental concern—but also with the United States. With respect to regional disputes, there are questions about China's commitment to the very principles it elevates in the GSI, given its deployment of military assets to assert its claims along disputed territorial and maritime borders.

In the context of tensions with the United States, the GSI reads as an effort to compete with the United States to China's advantage, raising questions about China's true intentions along with questions about if and how it might provide global public goods.

In responding to the GSI, the United States should be both vigilant and creative. The GSI is a new initiative and its future direction and impact are unclear, but it certainly has momentum. Washington's ability to respond appropriately depends on understanding how and why China is promoting the GSI and what it is gaining by doing so. Failure to acquire this understanding risks enabling China to expand its influence in ways that could bolster authoritarian tendencies and imperil US and regional interests in international norms, the rule of law, and the maintenance of peace and security. Washington should also recognize that by setting the concerns of governments in these important regions into relief, the GSI's bilateral or multilateral successes and failures may reveal strategic and diplomatic opportunities for the United States to reinforce its own standing and interests in Southeast and Central Asia.

Notes

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