

# China Looks to the SCO and BRICS as Key Tools of a Changing Order

## By Jiang Tianjiao

**China has played a pivotal role in creating and supporting multilateral institutions that are now emerging as key players in a transforming international order. Central among them is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS group of countries.**

**Jiang Tianjiao explains how China envisions their role in helping to shape a multipolar world going forward.**

SINCE THE FOUNDING of the People's Republic of China, the country has gradually developed a set of security concepts with Chinese characteristics through its involvement in international security affairs and global security governance.

This is a dynamic evolution shaped by shifting historical contexts. During the war against Japanese aggression and the early years after the founding of the PRC — a time dominated by war and revolution — China adhered to a traditional national security paradigm, prioritizing regime consolidation through confrontational measures and external warfare. Since the era of reform and opening began in 1979, however, China has pivoted toward a new security concept in line with peace and development, emphasizing mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and co-operation. Building upon this foundation, the China-led Global Security Initiative (GSI) sets forth “six commitments.” By championing shared, comprehensive, co-operative and sustainable security as the core, the GSI interprets the security concept China needs, and gives explicit answers to key questions of our time, such as what security concept the world needs and how countries can achieve common security.

China's security philosophy is a coherent synthesis of traditional heritage and contemporary innovation, uniquely defined by the dimensions of “commonality” and “development.” On the one hand, common security accurately reflects the concept of a community with a shared future. First, common security means that all countries, regardless of size, wealth or power, have an equal right to security. Second, common security

implies that a country's security should not come at the expense of others' security, or at the very least should not make other countries less secure, and ideally should achieve domestic security through promoting the security of others. Third, common security is manifested in the reality of humanity as an indivisible security community.

On the other hand, development security means moving beyond the binary thinking that development and security are opposites. It involves balancing security and development, achieving security through development and promoting security through development. Therefore, although some “low political” issues may refer to security, they are still essentially development issues, such as production safety and quality control. This is also the reason why China advocates for resolving security challenges through political dialogue, economic co-operation and non-violent means.

### CHINA'S ROLE IN TRANSFORMING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Since the start of US President Donald Trump's second term, the collapse of the liberal international order has gathered pace. Against this backdrop, China envisions a future international order in an equal and orderly multipolar world with inclusive economic globalization. This multilateral order is characterized by United Nations leadership and driven by the Global South, marking a clear shift from hegemonic rule to multilateral consultation and pluralistic values as its core governance trend. Chinese scholars argue that multipolar governance, mediated by international institutions, will be more effective at maintaining global stability than any form of hegemonic governance.

Compared to conflict-driven expectations such as hegemonic transition or the so-called Thucydides Trap, mainstream academia maintains a

cautious optimism regarding the resilience of the multilateral institutional order, emphasizing the constructive role of the Global South represented by China. Regarding China's role in this transition, conventional views tend toward a simple binary, labeling China as a “disrupter” of the liberal international order while casting the US as its “guardian.” However, the reality of international politics reveals a profound role reversal. The US, traditionally the mainstay of that order, is now exposing the liberal order to severe internal erosion and the risk of withdrawal. In contrast, emerging powers represented by China are defending multilateralism and promoting global governance reform, rather than destroying the existing order and building an alternative order.

To be more specific, China's contributions manifest across norms, institutions and specific governance fields. In terms of norms, President Xi Jinping's Global Governance Initiative at the 2025 “SCO+” summit systematically articulated China's vision for a new international order. Institutionally, China balances maintaining UN authority and reforming the Bretton Woods system by building complementary platforms — such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), the SCO Development Bank and the International Organization for Mediation. In practice, China leads in both traditional security and emerging frontiers, proposing “dual carbon” targets for climate governance and spearheading the Global AI Governance Initiative and the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization. These efforts underscore China's leadership in shaping the agenda for emerging global governance.

### THE SCO AND BRICS

China's approach within both the SCO and BRICS clearly reflects its vision of security and international order. For the Chinese government, the



Round table:  
Vladimir Putin  
with delegates at  
the 24th meeting  
of the SCO  
Council of Heads of  
Government  
in Moscow in  
November 2025  
Photo:  
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Kormilitsyna

SCO serves as a “regional stabilizer” centered on security. Meanwhile, BRICS functions as a “structural stabilizer” with development at its core.

The SCO’s stabilizing role in security is manifested in three dimensions: as a vehicle for institutionalized security co-operation, a pillar of geopolitical stability and a laboratory for security alternatives to military alliances. China defines the SCO as a partnership, not an alliance, representing a comprehensive, non-hegemonic, mechanized regional co-operation model. Its core mandates include combating the “three forces” (terrorism, separatism and extremism), stabilizing Central Asia and Afghanistan, and fostering border and law enforcement co-operation. Structurally, the SCO employs “consensus-based” decision-making, ensuring equal participation in regional governance through mutual agreement rather than formal voting.

Secondly, China uses the SCO as an effective

tool for geopolitical stability, primarily to prevent Central Asia from becoming an arena for great-power confrontation. Amid the Ukraine conflict and the complicating situation in Afghanistan, the SCO functions as a “low-militarized security and stability zone” to contain regional spillover. For example, while not a direct path for resolution of the India-Pakistan conflict, the SCO provides a normalized platform that fosters trust and mitigates escalation through dialogue. Furthermore, it acts as a strategic “valve” for the Afghanistan issue, utilizing the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, counter-terrorism co-operation and economic reconstruction to build a regional consensus on stability and development regarding Afghanistan.

Finally, China generally regards the SCO as part of a new security mechanism outside the Western security framework. In contrast to the traditional approaches of military alliances or

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security communities, China does not seek a military alliance through the SCO. Instead, it aims to use the SCO as a platform to unite countries outside the Western alliance system, contributing new governance concepts and security-related public goods to maintain regional stability and world peace. The purpose of this attempt is both to move beyond Western-centric security paradigms and to avoid the creation of new bloc-based confrontations, thereby forming a distinct “SCO Model.”

Unlike the SCO, BRICS is not a security-oriented organization, nor is security a core function of the group. Economic co-operation has always been the foundation of BRICS. This concept originated from economic investment and collaboration and prioritizes economic governance. Today, BRICS serves as a representative mechanism for the Global South and a platform for reform in economic co-operation and

financial governance. The Chinese government emphasizes three key functions of the group: stabilizing the global economy, balancing global governance and supporting multilateralism.

First, China leverages BRICS to hedge against systemic shocks and safeguard global economic stability. Amid high inflation, supply chain disruptions and geopolitical friction, BRICS co-operation prioritizes development by strengthening trade connectivity, promoting local currency settlements and cross-border payment co-operation to reduce single-currency dependence. This hedging strategy bolsters the resilience of emerging markets against external volatility. Currently, the NDB and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) serve as critical institutional tools — not as replacements, but as complements to the Bretton Woods system — providing vital short-term liquidity and long-term sustainable financing for member states.

Secondly, the Chinese government emphasizes the balancing role of BRICS in global governance. In a post-hegemonic world where there is no absolute dominant power, the expansion of BRICS and its multi-field co-operation helps enhance the voice and representation of developing countries in setting a global agenda, continuing to increase quotas and voting rights in international organizations, especially international financial institutions, and promoting more balanced global rule-making. In addition, policy co-ordination among BRICS countries on global issues such as climate change, food security and digital governance facilitates a new round of development and rebalancing in global governance.

Finally, China believes that BRICS serves as a multilateral pillar to counterbalance unilateralism. The Chinese government emphasizes that BRICS supports the international system, with the UN at its core. The logic is that the more robust the mechanisms for multilateral consultation, the

more constrained the space for unilateral action, leading to a more stable system. Consequently, at the political level, BRICS is viewed as a vital support for multilateralism. Also, beyond the G7, BRICS provides a co-operation mechanism centered on non-Western countries that emphasizes the right to development and sovereign equality, gradually evolving into a cornerstone of international multilateralism.

It should be noted, however, that within China's security concept, development and security are two sides of the same coin. There is no security without development, and the very purpose of security is to enable development. In fact, the co-operation agendas of the SCO and BRICS increasingly overlap. This is natural. Emphasizing that BRICS co-operation focuses on economic governance does not deny its role in security governance, but rather reflects how it is more in line with China's dialectic of balancing development and security.

#### **INTERNAL DIVERGENCES WITHIN THE SCO AND BRICS**

In general, China views divergence as normal within multilateral organizations, which implies that both BRICS and the SCO have some common features that inevitably lead to differences between their member states.

First, the structural attribute of a “heterogeneous coalition” accounts for both the persistence and resilience of divergence. The SCO and BRICS encompass countries with diverse civilizations, political systems and stages of development, leading to inherent differences in their geopolitical interests, security priorities and foreign-policy orientations. Second, organizational expansion inevitably brings greater diversity and complexity, thereby generating new divergences. The expansion of the SCO, which now includes 10 member states (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus) has introduced bilateral disputes into the multilateral framework, intensifying the organization's internal tensions. The expansion of BRICS from its original five members — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — to the current 11 with the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia — has similarly increased the costs of co-ordination among member states. Third, because BRICS is a multilateral organization with a distinct economic focus, its members have varying degrees of dependence on the Western economic system. Consequently, their positions are not entirely consistent on issues such as sanctions and financial payment systems.

To manage SCO divergences, China first adheres to non-alignment and non-confrontation, opposing the politicization of member disputes. Second, it promotes common security, advocating for consultation over confrontation. Third, China prioritizes development, leveraging economic co-operation — specifically in infrastructure, energy and trade — to dilute political friction. The underlying logic is that expanding shared interests minimizes the destructiveness of disagreements. Regarding India-Pakistan tensions, for example, China encourages bilateral dialogue through existing mechanisms to effectively insulate this dispute from the SCO framework.

China conceptualizes BRICS primarily as an economic platform, anchoring co-operation in trade facilitation and infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the NDB. By addressing shared energy security concerns and strictly avoiding bloc-based politics, China minimizes tensions stemming from members' diverse foreign policies. Furthermore, it fosters cohesion by emphasizing a shared Global South identity. To manage internal divergences, such as those in China-India relations, China

bypasses sensitive issues in favor of an incremental, easy-to-difficult co-operation path, ensuring that functional progress remains unhindered by political friction.

Finally, China employs an institutional strategy to manage multilateral divergences. First, it steers both organizations toward a functionalist path by prioritizing high-consensus areas such as counter-terrorism, trade and climate governance while sidelining controversial topics. Second, China promotes deep institutionalization to buffer against political friction, backing structured mechanisms such as the SCO's Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, and various ministerial meetings, including the BRICS' NDB, CRA, and Partnership on the New Industrial Revolution. Finally, China emphasizes balanced and manageable expansion, ensuring that enlargement preserves operational efficiency and avoids bloc-formation. For example, it advocates for the “de-multilateralization” of bilateral disputes, insisting they remain outside these frameworks to prevent the organizations from being hijacked or politically captured.

#### **CHINA'S EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE SCO AND BRICS**

The SCO is set to evolve from a security-centric platform into a comprehensive governance framework. In the context of the Ukraine conflict, traditional security threats are resurfacing. The organization will deepen its institutional security functions by 2035. First, this includes normalizing technology-driven counter-terrorism that focuses on digital and cross-border law enforcement and integrating new security priorities such as cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection. Second, new security issues will be integrated into the framework, especially the issues of cybersecurity, data security and the protection of critical infrastructure. Furthermore, the SCO will



solidify its role in regional stability by establishing long-term management mechanisms to address instability in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The SCO also will increasingly prioritize economic and development issues. Recognizing that security co-operation alone cannot sustain long-term cohesion, the organization will leverage connectivity and energy initiatives to enhance “functional stickiness” and fortify its security foundation. By 2035, this may yield a “reverse spillover” model, where security collaboration facilitates broader regional co-operation. Third, internal balancing mechanisms will mature as conflict management becomes vital for the long-term coexistence of India and Pakistan. Adhering to its feature of “low institutionalization and high consultation,” the SCO will steadily reform its organizational systems, expansion mechanisms and decision-making principles.

On the other hand, as the vanguard and leading force of the Global South, BRICS will upgrade from being an economic co-operation platform to a co-ordination core for the Global South. First, BRICS expansion will become normalized, although the pace will likely become more cautious. In the future, BRICS will maintain an open expansion trend and become one of the most representative mechanisms of the Global South. The “BRICS+” co-operation model will serve as an open platform for broader collaboration among Global South nations, gradually forming a tiered interaction structure.

Second, financial and monetary co-operation will deepen, with BRICS steadily advancing “de-risking” rather than “de-dollarization” to diversify the global financial system. Third, member states will strengthen security and non-security co-operation, enhancing their collective capacity to govern international security and manage geopolitical crises as a Global South vanguard. Finally, BRICS co-ordination on global issues will

significantly improve, yielding tangible results in sustainable development, climate finance, green investment and technical co-operation, global digital governance, food and energy security, and poverty alleviation.

Admittedly, neither the SCO nor BRICS is China-dominated; their commitment to consultative co-governance is precisely why they enjoy broad Global South support. Future progress hinges on internal co-ordination and external interaction. Internally, strategic trust among China, Russia and India — the shared pillars of both groups — is paramount. Externally, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney’s speech at the World Economic Forum this year indicated that many developed countries are beginning to seriously contemplate strategic autonomy and a new international order. In addition, French President Emmanuel Macron has even expressed a desire to attend the BRICS summit. By contrast, the US attitude remains a volatile variable. As these mechanisms expand, they may be viewed as threats to American regional interests. Consequently, managing strategic communication with the US will be a defining challenge over the coming decade.

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