



From Principle To Practice: Using the Global Security Initiative and the Kunming Forum to Advance Nuclear Risk Reduction

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Cover Photo: Kunming, Yunnan, China: Square with the “Running Bull” Monument in front of the Kunming Railway Station.
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FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE: USING THE GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE AND THE KUNMING FORUM TO ADVANCE NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION

C Uday Bhaskar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's expanding nuclear arsenal and its nuclear-weapon state (NWS) status create a responsibility gap between its material power and its contribution to nuclear security governance. The Global Security Initiative (GSI) offers a normative framework for China to lead, but remains under-operationalised on nuclear issues. This paper argues that the GSI should evolve from ad-hoc mediation toward institutionalised nuclear risk reduction. It proposes a four-step agenda: academic/analytical study, confidence-building measures, no-first-use norm entrepreneurship, and regional dialogues. These ideas require a testbed before entering state policy. The *China-South and Southeast Asian Think Tank Forum*, also called the Kunming Forum, as an established Track-1.5/ Track-2 platform, provides the appropriate ecosystem to develop, critique, and refine nuclear proposals under the GSI framework. A review of the Kunming Forum's proceedings from 2013 to 2025 shows that while the forum has done active work on development and non-traditional security, critical topics like nuclear stability remain unaddressed. This paper, prepared for and presented at the Kunming Forum meeting in July 2026, argues that exploring the nuclear field is the logical next step for both the GSI and the Forum.¹

THE P5, THE NPT, AND THE UNKEPT PROMISE

Fifty six years after it entered into force in 1970, the grand bargain of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – the non-nuclear-weapon states forswearing nuclear arms in exchange for the five nuclear-weapon states (P5/N5) pledge to curb both vertical and horizontal proliferation – stands compromised.

On vertical proliferation, the P5/N5 have not only modernised but expanded delivery systems, yield options, and deployment postures. China's silo construction, Russia's hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV), and US low-yield warheads each mark a departure from minimum deterrence.² On horizontal proliferation, the record is more troubling. Over the last five decades, the number of nuclear weapon-capable states has increased

¹ The paper was originally prepared for and presented at the 11th China-South and Southeast Asian Think Tank Forum, co-hosted by the Global South Think Tanks Cooperation Alliance and the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences/Chinese (Kunming) Academy of South and Southeast Asian Studies in Kunming, China on 4 July 2026.

² Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "World Nuclear Forces," *SIPRI Yearbook 2024* (Oxford University Press, 2024): 271–367, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/YB24%2007%20WNF.pdf>

from the original five to nine. Through action, inaction, or strategic ambivalence, the United States, the former Soviet Union, and China have differently enabled – or failed to prevent – the emergence of four “de facto” nuclear powers: India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. While India, Pakistan³ and Israel⁴ are not signatories to the NPT, North Korea withdrew from the treaty citing security considerations.⁵ Cumulatively, the actions of these four countries have demonstrated the limitations of containing nuclear proliferation. Whether through technology transfer, permissive intelligence postures, or security guarantees that subsidised proliferation, the NPT’s core firewall has been breached.

Notwithstanding these transgressions, the world cannot afford nostalgia as policy. The existential risks remain unchanged: those of the deliberate use of nuclear weapons, as at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and the catastrophic failure of civilian nuclear systems, as at Fukushima in March 2011.⁶ Therefore if the NPT’s original bargain has frayed, the obligation to ensure that there is not another Hiroshima, Nagasaki or Fukushima has only sharpened for the P5/N5.

Preventing a third category – a hybrid scenario wherein nuclear war, cyber intrusion, or command-and-control failures trigger a radiological release – also demands leadership and initiative from the P5/N5 states. Given their technical depth, diplomatic stature and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandates, these powers bear a special responsibility to institutionalise risk reduction measures.

This paper focuses on how China, as a member of the P5/N5, can contribute to nuclear restraint – a P5/N5 initiative that can be eventually expanded to include the four nuclear armed states outside the NPT but at an appropriate time in future. It argues that China, through the Global Security Initiative (GSI), can begin to discharge that responsibility in practice by using the *China-South and Southeast Asian Think Tank Forum*, also called the Kunming Forum, as a testbed.

THE “NUCLEAR RESPONSIBILITY” GAP

By all measures, China now belongs in the category of major powers. It is a permanent member of the UNSC, a Nuclear-Weapon State under the NPT, and the world’s second-largest economy.⁷ China is modernising and expanding its nuclear arsenal faster than

³ On Pakistan, see: Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁴ On Israel, see: Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁵ On North Korea, see: Siegfried S. Hecker, *Hinge Points: An Inside Look at North Korea’s Nuclear Program* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

⁶ “The Fukushima Daiichi Accident: Report by the IAEA Director General,” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, 2015, <https://www-pub.iaea.org/mtcd/publications/pdf/pub1710-reportbythedg-web.pdf>; Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (& Schuster, 1986).

⁷ DataBank: World Development Indicators, World Bank, accessed on 21 August 2026, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

any other P5/N5 state. Open-source estimates place the Chinese nuclear stockpile at roughly 620 warheads as of 2025, with three new silo fields for solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) under construction in Gansu, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang, new silos for its liquid-fuel DF-5 ICBMs in central-eastern China, a new D-61 land-based nuclear-capable ICBM, regular Jin-class SSBN deterrent patrols, and deployment of DF-27 HGVs.⁸ China maintains a declared no-first-use policy and has repeatedly affirmed, with the other P5/N5 states, that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”⁹

Yet, China’s institutional contribution to nuclear security governance remains modest relative to its weight. It has not joined any bilateral arms control treaties such as the New START, it maintains limited transparency on force posture and doctrine, and it has not led multilateral crisis communication or strategic stability mechanisms.¹⁰

The GSI, announced by President Xi Jinping in April 2022, marked an attempt to articulate China’s vision for international security.¹¹ Its most visible success was brokering the Iran–Saudi Arabia rapprochement in March 2023, which reduced tensions across West Asia.¹² On nuclear issues specifically, however, GSI has produced principles rather than operational frameworks. This paper identifies that gap and proposes a pathway to close it, using the Kunming Forum as the institutional bridge.

THE MISMATCH: CHINA’S POWER AND ITS NUCLEAR SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The gap between China’s capability and contribution is not abstract. Strategic stability in the 21st century faces three structural pressures. First, the breakdown of US-Russia

⁸ Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, “Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2026,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 82, no. 4 (2026): 293-322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2026.2691662>

⁹ White House Press Office, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States On Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” *US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva*, 3 January 2022, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2022/01/03/p5-statement/>; The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text: China’s National Defense in the New Era,” *Xinhua*, 24 July 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html; “No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China*, 23 July 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458632.html

¹⁰ “China: Nuclear Crisis Communications and Risk Reduction An Interview with Dr. Tong Zhao,” *Institute of Security and Technology*, June 2024, <https://securityandtechnology.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CATALINK-China.pdf>

¹¹ Xi Jinping, “Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation” (Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, Beijing), *Embassy of The People’s Republic of China in The Republic of Latvia*, 21 April 2022, https://lv.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202204/t20220421_10671081.htm

¹² “Joint Trilateral Statement by the People’s Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China*, 10 March 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2818_663626/2819_663628/202303/t20230311_11039241.html

arms control agreements. With the New START having expired in February 2026 without any follow-on negotiations to renew or extend it, the two largest nuclear powers – United States and Russia – are, for the first time since 1972, operating without any treaty constraints on their deployed strategic warheads.¹³

The second pressure comes from technological changes. Hypersonic weapons compress time for decision-making. Counter-space capabilities threaten satellites used for early warning and those for nuclear command, control and communications (NC3). Offensive cyber capabilities create new pathways by interfering with or spoofing the nuclear systems.¹⁴ The entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear assets raises the risk of inadvertent escalation.

Third, nuclear multipolarity is real and complex. China's nuclear expansion, combined with ongoing modernisation of nuclear forces by India, Pakistan, North Korea, and to a lesser extent by the United Kingdom and France, means that future crises may involve three or more nuclear actors, and may not be limited to bilateral conflicts.¹⁵ Crisis models built for the Cold War do not account for this complexity. China's doctrine emphasises minimum deterrence and No First Use (NFU),¹⁶ which historically justified a small arsenal and limited engagement with arms control.¹⁷ That logic is under strain. As the Chinese arsenal grows and acquires more diverse delivery systems, rival nuclear powers will increasingly factor China into their own nuclear planning.

The 2025 US Department of Defense's annual report to the Congress states that "China's historic military buildup has made the U.S. homeland increasingly vulnerable."¹⁸ India's cites China as part of its "two-front" problem (the other being Pakistan) which compels its nuclear force modernisation. Japan's defense white papers now discuss China's nuclear buildup.¹⁹ The absence of structured risk reduction

¹³ Aiden Warreb, "New START expired. Now what for global nuclear stability?" *Lowy Institute*, 17 February 2026, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-start-expired-now-what-global-nuclear-stability>

¹⁴ James M. Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 56–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320

¹⁵ Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Pan Zhenqiang, "China's No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," in *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, eds Li Bin and Tong Zhao (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2016): 51-78, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf

¹⁷ Liping Xia, "China's Nuclear Doctrine: Debates and Evolution," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 June 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/06/chinas-nuclear-doctrine-debates-and-evolution>

¹⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025*, Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025): VI, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF>

¹⁹ Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2026: Digest* (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2026), https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2026/pdf/DOJ2026_Digest_EN.pdf

channels between China and the other eight nuclear powers increases the chance that an incident or misread signal escalates rapidly.

The GSI currently does not fill this void. Its six commitments emphasise “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable” security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, commitment to the UN Charter and opposition to bloc confrontation, legitimate security concerns of states including in non-traditional domains, and peaceful dispute resolution.²⁰ These are consistent with nuclear risk reduction, but the GSI lacks dedicated mechanisms. For instance, there is no GSI working group on strategic stability, no Chinese-proposed crisis hotline that includes space and cyber nodes, and no public GSI doctrine paper on how NFU operates in practice under conditions of conventional attack on nuclear assets.

The Iran–Saudi deal demonstrates, however, that when Beijing commits diplomatic capital under the GSI, it can achieve hard security outcomes. The same has not been attempted for nuclear stability. The normative case is straightforward. Major powers that benefit from an open global economy and a stable international order incur obligations to provide public goods. Nuclear strategic stability is the clearest such good. A catastrophic nuclear exchange or major radiological release would not respect borders. Agricultural disruption, refugee flows, and economic collapse would affect all states.²¹

After all, no state would want another Hiroshima or Chernobyl-like disaster. China’s economic rise depends on the global supply chains, maritime trade, and foreign investment, and therefore it should view preventing a nuclear catastrophe as both a moral responsibility and a material interest. The mismatch between China’s growing capabilities and its limited institutional investment in nuclear risk reduction ultimately carries strategic costs.

WHY THE GSI IS THE RIGHT VEHICLE FOR CHINESE NUCLEAR LEADERSHIP?

If China is to lead on nuclear risk reduction, it needs a vehicle that aligns with its diplomatic identity and domestic political constraints. The GSI provides that alignment in three ways.

First, conceptually the GSI frames security as “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable.” It explicitly endorses the principle of “indivisible security,” meaning that one state’s security cannot be achieved at the expense of another’s.²² Nuclear risk

²⁰ “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 21 February 2023,

https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/pdf/The_Global_Security_Initiative_Concept_Paper.pdf

²¹ Alan Robock and Owen Brian Toon, “Self-assured destruction: The climate impacts of nuclear war,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 68, no. 5 (2012): 66–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340212459127>

²² “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

reduction is the purest expression of indivisible security. No state can be truly secure until incentives for first use persist, if crisis communication fails during a conventional war, or if emerging operational domains entangle with nuclear weapon systems. For instance, a cyberattack on an early-warning satellite could be “interpreted” as a preemptive nuclear first use, and a conventional hypersonic strike against a dual-use airbase risks being misconstrued as a preemptive disarming nuclear first strike. GSI’s language of “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable” security therefore creates a natural mandate for work on strategic stability.

Second, politically China has been reluctant to join US-led or NATO-led processes, which it views as extensions of a Western strategic culture and as attempts to constrain China’s rise. Beijing declined to participate in New START or its predecessor negotiations, arguing that its arsenal is an order of magnitude smaller than those of the United States and Russia.²³ The GSI is China’s own brand, launched by President Xi Jinping and linked to the broader suite of Global Development Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative. Leading on nuclear issues through the GSI allows China to set the agenda, vocabulary, and participation rules, rather than reacting to external frameworks. This enhances both status and autonomy. It also allows China to frame nuclear stability as a South-South public good, not as a concession to Western pressure.

Third, empirically, the Iran-Saudi rapprochement shows that the GSI can move beyond rhetoric when political will is applied. That mediation addressed sectarian rivalry, proxy conflicts, ballistic missile proliferation, and nuclear latency concerns in the Gulf – issues as complex as strategic stability.²⁴ The process involved senior Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) International Department officials, who relied on China’s economic leverage with both parties, and produced a public agreement that reshaped regional dynamics. The same diplomatic energy, if directed at nuclear stability and risk reduction, could produce results even while acknowledging that the global multipolar nuclear order is far more complex and tangled than the Iran-Saudi binary.

Nevertheless, China’s objections must be addressed and redressed. One argument is that China prizes strategic opacity and that transparency would undermine deterrence. Yet limited, reciprocal transparency can strengthen deterrence by reducing worst-case assumptions.²⁵ If adversaries overestimate China’s arsenal or its willingness to use

²³ “China says expiration of US-Russia arms treaty regrettable,” *Reuters*, 5 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-expiration-us-russia-arms-treaty-regrettable-2026-02-05/>

²⁴ Jonathan Fulton, “China’s Role in Conflict Mediation in the Middle East featuring Sanam Vakil and Helena Legarda,” China-MENA Podcast, *Atlantic Council*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/podcast/chinas-role-in-conflict-mediation-in-the-middle-east>

²⁵ Fiona Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “Assuring Assured Retaliation: China’s Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability,” *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00215

nuclear weapons, they may adopt dangerous launch-on-warning postures. China's participation in the P5/N5 Nuclear Glossary and its past exchanges on nuclear doctrine with American scholars, demonstrate that technical dialogue is possible without revealing operational secrets.²⁶

Another objection is that China prefers bilateral conversations over multilateral channels. The GSI, however, is inherently multilateral in its rhetoric. Using it for plurilateral confidence-building measures (CBMs) among the P5/N5 plus invited states is consistent with that approach.

In short, GSI's normative content, political ownership, and proven capacity for mediation make it the most credible platform for China to assume greater responsibility for nuclear stability.

FROM STUDY TO ACTION: A GSI NUCLEAR AGENDA

Translating principle into practice requires a sequenced agenda. Four steps are feasible, consistent with China's interests, and escalatory only by design.

Step one is **academic/analytical study**. Establish a GSI Task Force on Strategic Stability.²⁷ Its task is to map emerging risks, compressed decision time for leadership, entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear systems in space and cyber domains, and the dynamics of trilateral deterrence among the United States, Russia, and China. The task force then produces a public "GSI White Paper on 21st-Century Nuclear Risks." This creates a shared analytic baseline inside China's bureaucracy, builds domestic expertise, and signals intent to the international community without requiring immediate concessions. A precedent for this exists in the P5/N5 process and in China's 2019 Defense White Paper, which discussed international strategic stability.²⁸

Step two is **minimalist CBMs**. Under the GSI, China could propose dedicated crisis communication links between P5/N5 nuclear command-and-control nodes that include space situational awareness centers and cyber incident reporting cells. Beijing can also expand its existing practice of pre-launch notification for ICBM tests to cover

²⁶ "P5 Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms (2022 Edition)," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 29 December 2021, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/disarmament_armscontrol/npt/202112/t20211229_10476752.htm. See also: David Santoro, "Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned," Special Report *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, 8 December 2022, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/David-Santoro-US-China-Strategic-Nuclear-Dialogues.pdf>

²⁷ The task force can draw from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the China Academy of Social Sciences, the PLA Academy of Military Science, and civilian technical institutes such as the China Institute of Atomic Energy.

²⁸ "Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era," *Xinhua*, 24 July 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) tests and HGV experiments. These notifications reduce the risk that a test is misinterpreted as an attack.

Finally, an annual GSI Track-1.5 dialogue on misperception, involving military operators, technical experts, and political-military affairs officials, would institutionalise contact and formalise communications that help mitigate the risk of inadvertent escalation. These steps are low-cost, reversible, and consistent with China's NFU posture. They do not require China to disclose warhead numbers or locations.

Step three is ***norm entrepreneurship on NFU***. China is the only P5/N5 state with an unconditional NFU pledge.²⁹ The GSI could serve as a vehicle to socialise the NFU norm across the P5/N5 states through a P5 joint declaration that reaffirms the principle that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” while explicitly pledging not to target the nuclear command-and-control and early-warning systems.

Complimenting this, the GSI-hosted technical workshops examining how NFU is operationalised in doctrines, targeting policies, alerting procedures, and crisis decision-making; and how it can translate declarative commitments into tangible strategic stability, while prompting other states to clarify their own declaratory policies. Should Washington and Moscow reject a formal NFU pledge, Beijing can alternately pursue multilateral commitments to avoid peacetime nuclear-conventional entanglement – a lower threshold yet valuable risk-reduction norm.³⁰

Step four is ***regional application/dialogues***. GSI should not attempt to mediate entrenched regional standoffs like the India–Pakistan conflict or other intractable nuclear disputes, where China's interests preclude it from being a neutral broker of the conflict. Instead, it should focus on multilateral non-military cooperation. Convening workshops on nuclear safety, security culture, and lessons from Fukushima for civilian nuclear programs across South and Southeast Asia offers a pragmatic entry point.³¹

The GSI can also support regional mechanisms by sharing best practices on physical protection of radiological and nuclear material, material accounting, and emergency response. These address real proliferation and safety risks, build technical communities, and separate risk reduction from sovereignty conflicts. Given GSI's stated focus on the periphery, South and Southeast Asia are the natural starting point.

²⁹ India has a similar doctrinal position regarding NFU but currently China does not recognise India as a nuclear weapon state and hence there has been no significant engagement with New Delhi in this domain.

³⁰ Tong Zhao, “Practical Ways to Promote U.S.-China Arms Control Cooperation,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 October 2021, [https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-Eurasia/posts/2020/10/practical-ways-to-promote-us-china-arms-control-cooperation](https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/posts/2020/10/practical-ways-to-promote-us-china-arms-control-cooperation)

³¹ This aligns well with the nuclear ambitions of Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Thailand as well as established regional frameworks like ASEAN's Nuclear Energy Cooperation Sub-Sector Network and Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone treaty. See: Mely Caballero-Anthony and Julius Cesar Trajano, *Nuclear Governance in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2022).

Together, these steps move the GSI from declaration to implementation. Informed and objective scholarship creates domain knowledge that can shape policy initiatives. Consensually-evolved CBMs progressively enhance comfort level and build a habit of compliance, thereby leading to norms that can be robust guardrails. Regional dialogues deliver concrete safety benefits. None of these require China to abandon its core interests, and all of them enhance its reputation as a provider of security public goods.

KUNMING FORUM AS THE INCUBATION SYSTEM: FROM ACADEMIC CONCEPT TO STATE POLICY

Policy ideas do not automatically leap from white papers into government practice without testing. They require an ecosystem where concepts can be reviewed, critiqued, and refined before official endorsement. For the GSI's nuclear agenda, the Kunming Forum provides the ideal platform and the appropriate ecosystem to incubate ideas and concepts before their formal adoption into state policy.

The Kunming Forum is an annual high-level diplomatic and academic dialogue, hosted annually since 2013 by the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS). It sees participation from flagship Chinese institutes and Chinese scholars with current or former ties to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), MFA, and CPC School system.³² The forum operates at the Track-1.5/ Track-2 levels, with participants from India, ASEAN, Central Asia, and beyond, including scholars, political figures, and business leaders. The forum's mandate covers non-traditional security, and its location in Yunnan positions it as China's gateway to the extended neighbourhood – a region that the GSI claims to prioritise.

A review of published proceedings from the Kunming Forum from 2013 to 2025 shows its success in cultivating dialogue on non-traditional security, regional connectivity, and development cooperation.³³ The forum has advanced research and engagement on the Belt and Road Initiative, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, public health, disaster relief, and climate resilience.

To date, however, the issues of nuclear risk reduction and strategic stability have remained unaddressed within the Kunming Forum's agenda. This gap does not diminish its work on existing priorities, which rightly address immediate regional needs. After all, Southeast Asian states do not currently rank China's nuclear expansion as a top-tier threat, focusing instead on maritime coercion, economic security, and climate change.³⁴

³² "The 11th China-South and Southeast Asian Think Tank Forum Held," *International Department, Central Committee of CPC*, 7 June 2026, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/ldt/202607/t20260714_169882.html

³³ For published proceedings of the China-South Asia and Southeast Asia Think Tank Forum, vols. 1–11, see: Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS), <http://www.sky.yn.gov.cn/>

³⁴ Jeffrey Ordaniel and Carl Baker, "Nuclear weapons and related security issues in Southeast Asia: Understanding regional views and preferences," *Issues & Insights* 24, no.3 (September 2024): 1, <https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Issues-and-Insights-SR3.pdf>

However, identifying this gap recognises a clear opportunity that the Kunming Forum is uniquely positioned to address.

Given the GSI's emphasis on indivisible collective security and the potential of nuclear capability to vitiate this ambience, nuclear stability represents a natural next furrow. Engaging with this issue would align the Kunming Forum's scholarly ecosystem with the emerging security challenges of the 21st century, and allow GSI concepts to take root in policy.

The Kunming Forum's value is threefold. First, deniability with proximity. Academic participants can table ideas without official commitments. And yet their institutional affiliations mean proposals are read seriously in Beijing. For instance, a paper on GSI-proposed CBMs can be interpreted as academic exploration, not official policy.

Second, foreign scholars provide feedback in the form of early, candid reactions to Chinese concepts, revealing political red lines and technical flaws before ideas reach Track-1 channels. For instance, Indian or Vietnamese scholars will quickly note if a proposed launch-notification mechanism fails to cover their security concerns.

Third, the papers presented at the Kunming Forum can be revised, peer-reviewed within the forum, and briefed upward through participating institutions with institutionalised links to the Chinese MFA and Central Military Commission.³⁵ This is indeed a proven Track-1.5/ Track-2 mechanism across the region. For instance, the ASEAN Regional Forum Track-2 workshops on preventive diplomacy and maritime security regularly informed the ARF inter-sessional meetings and official work plans, the Shangri-La Dialogue's side-meetings have shaped defence policy language, and platforms like the Boao Forum and Xiangshan Forum bridge expert economic and defense discourse with official policy.³⁶

The Kunming Forum can similarly perform this function for GSI's nuclear agenda. Concretely, the forum should establish a GSI Nuclear Stability Dialogue. In its first year, Chinese scholars would outline a GSI White Paper and draft CBMs on launch notification, hotline resilience, and NFU implementation discussed earlier in this paper.

As a next step, the CBMs would be stress-tested by the Forum's foreign participants and in year two, revised proposals would be workshopped with technical experts. By year three, mature concepts could be briefed to the Chinese MFA as potential GSI deliverables for a P5 or ASEAN+3 meeting.

³⁵ Brian L. Job, "Track 2 diplomacy: Ideational contribution to the evolving Asian security order," in *Assessing Track 2 diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region: A CSCAP reader*, eds Desmond Ball and Kwa Chong Guan (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University; S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010): 112-161.

³⁶ See for instance: Li Shangyi "13th Beijing Xiangshan Forum aims to tackle pressing international challenges, officials say," *China Daily*, 8 September 2026, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202609/08/WS6aa01ba5e4b06d4aa055cf9d.html>

This process de-risks innovation for China. If a proposal fails at the Kunming Forum, it was an academic discussion. If it gains traction, Beijing can adopt it as a GSI initiative with confidence that it has been internationally vetted. The forum thus bridges the gap between study and state action. It is the incubating system that allows GSI ideas to take root in the policy ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

China's growing nuclear capabilities create a responsibility gap that the GSI is normatively suited to fill. A four-step agenda: academic/analytical study, minimalist confidence-building measures, NFU norm entrepreneurship, and regional safety dialogues gives the GSI operational content. Yet ideas require testing before states adopt them. The Kunming Forum provides a Track-2 environment where GSI nuclear proposals can be tested, critiqued, and refined before entering state policy.

As a principal beneficiary of the post-1945 order and the architect of the GSI, it is in China's interest as well as within its capacity to ensure the Initiative's next chapter moves beyond ad-hoc mediation and instead toward actually preventing catastrophe. The academic community that convenes at the Kunming Forum has the necessary expertise to shape that effort. If the GSI is to matter, it must help prevent the next nuclear disaster. The Kunming Forum is where that work ought to begin.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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