



Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Bachelor in International Relations

Final Bachelor Thesis

Framing an Alternative Order: China's Global South Narrative in the Middle East

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Summary

During the past decade, the international distribution of power and global configuration has undergone a major shift towards multipolarity. The rise of the Global South is one of the key cornerstones of contemporary world politics, as it has become the object of competition among the relevant powers, stemming from the unbalanced world political and economic developments. These emerging powers and economies have strengthened intra-regional cooperation thus increasing its importance in the international arena and presenting new alternative alignments.

This shift in the distribution of power has led to competing narratives on development, power and justice. In this sense, geopolitical narratives are key when talking about global ordering and disordering, because they represent a specific vision of the global order, how it is envisioned and which actors are legitimised or even delegitimised. Hence, they serve as an enriched tool to sustain or contest the current status quo.

Faced with this reality, China has launched a series of initiatives that seek to adapt the international order to its own advantage. In this regard, it has used the rhetoric of the Global South as a strategic tool to reshape moral and political foundations, based on principles such as non-intervention, sovereignty and shared development. Since the early 21st century it has developed relations with most MENA countries (Middle East and North Africa) through bilateral and multilateral institutions, such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the Gulf Cooperation Council or the prominent Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a result, China has become one of the main partners of many gulf countries. These partnerships have proved to be efficient because Middle Eastern countries share with China a common feeling of being victims of the West, which has created new alternative power centres that entail the diffusion of norms and the reconfiguration of legitimacy.

Therefore, this paper seeks to find evidence that China is indeed using the discourse of the Global South to position itself as an alternative to the West in the Middle East. To this end, this research will analyse the way in which this narrative sustains or contest the current global order and the main Chinese foreign policy initiatives that support this hypothesis.

This research is primarily situated within the framework of Framing theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Primarily, Framing Theory will be utilized to examine the

strategic reconstruction of the global order, analysing how specific narratives are selected, salient and organized to shape international reality. Complementarily, the study will adopt a CDA approach to deconstruct the links between power, ideology, and social actors. While various traditions within CDA offer valuable insights, this research will adopt Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach. This choice is grounded in the need to understand how China's strategic narratives are designed to penetrate and reshape the social representations of the Global South. Van Dijk's framework, particularly his concept of the 'Ideological Square', provides a precise analytical tool to deconstruct the binary opposition between 'South-South solidarity' and 'Western hegemony.'

The selected corpus enables a discourse analysis to be conducted at three interconnected levels. At the macro level, the research is structured around the three major initiatives of Chinese foreign policy: The Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilisation Initiative and the Global Development Initiative. Next, the meso level examines the rhetoric employed by President Xi Jinping within regional organisations.

This work is motivated by two main reasons, one empirical and the other theoretical. Firstly, because it is necessary to test whether a transformation of the international system is really taking place, leaving behind the Western-liberal model in favour of a more fragmented and multipolar one. Secondly, the hypothesis has relevant theoretical significance in traditional paradigms of international relations. In this regard, this analysis seeks to study the role of non-Western actors, the power of discourse and normative contestation, in a context where material capabilities and institutional design were prioritised and believed to be central.

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“When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction”

Joseph Nye, 2004

1. State of the Art

1.1 The Transformation of the International System: From Liberal Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The liberal international order (LIO) is under normative and institutional contestation (Goddard et al., 2024). The emergence of new centres of power has been accompanied by increasingly assertive—and in some cases revisionist—approaches toward the US-led international order, most notably China. This systemic backlash has prompted sustained questioning of its institutions, norms and underlying assumptions of the existing order. What remains contested, however, is the magnitude of this transformation and how the new order should be conceptualised.

Over the past decade, the international distribution of power and global configuration has indeed shifted decisively towards multipolarity (Qader et al., 2025). Kohl (2025) conceptualises multipolarity as “an international system whereby multiple states are characterised by equal or nearly equal powers and influence such that hegemony is not exerted by one state”. While emerging powers have expanded their intra-regional influence—generating both strategic influence and systemic uncertainty—classical realists like Gilpin (1987) contend that the international system is inherently hierarchical, asserting that global stability is contingent upon hegemonic leadership.

Despite the persistence of US primacy, the rise of China and other Global South actors has eroded the perceived legitimacy and representativeness of the LIO. In this context, Asia has been a critical focal point for analysing distribution of power structures, given its long-standing entanglement in great-power dynamics since the colonial period (Aryal, 2025).

Great powers are in fact seeking to consolidate “spheres of influence” by projecting political, economic and security leverage over geostrategic regions. Resnick (2022) described these spheres as “explicit or implicit agreement by one state to allow a rival state to militarily dominate a territory that lies outside both states borders”. This phenomenon is evident in Russia’s pursuit of influence over former Soviet republics, China’s intensified military posturing toward Taiwan, and the United States’ renewed political interventionism in Latin America.

Nonetheless, whether this system shift inherently undermines American strategic interests remains a point of contention (de Areilza Carvajal, 2025). Since the Trump administration, segments of the American political elite and public opinion increasingly weigh the costs of unjustified interventionism, encapsulated in the slogan “Make America Great Again”. This reflects Gilpin’s (1987) thesis that emerging powers tend to enhance their relative capabilities due to the hegemon’s growing costs in maintaining the existing order. Consequently, the LIO is being challenged not only by its primary competitor, China, the only actor possessing both the intent and capacity to reshape the global order—but also by its original architect, the United States (Düzgit et al., 2025).

This retreat from globalisation is mirrored by a resurgence of nationalism and a growing perception that multilateral and regional agreements have exceeded their appropriate scope. As a result, international relations are increasingly interpreted through the lens of security. Political elites are inclined to frame the disruption of the existing order as the sole solution rather than emphasising on reformist approaches. As Philip Stephens (2015) aptly notes, the international community is now facing “the end of the end of history”.

1.2 The Global South as a Central Arena: From Anti-Colonial Solidarity to Strategic Partnership

The rise of the Global South represents one of the cornerstones of contemporary world politics, serving as a primary site of competition among major powers due to unbalanced global political and economic developments (Prabhakar, 2024). Beyond its geographic connotations, the "Global South" functions as a political identity constructed in opposition to "the West" (Zhou, 2024). The proliferation of this term signifies a departure from the binary categories—such as East vs. West or Advanced vs. Primitive—that have traditionally dominated the geopolitical debate.

Samir Amin (2000) defined the Global South as a "set of countries integrated into the global system through structural unequal relations of dependency, occupying a peripheral or semi-peripheral position within the international political economy". These countries, bound by a shared history of Western interventionism, structural inequality and poor representation, have leveraged the principle of sovereignty to coordinate collective action and enhance their systemic influence.

The origins of the Global South trace back to the Bandung Conference in Indonesia (1955), where twenty-nine countries from Africa and Asia gathered, collectively representing more than half of the world's total population. This meeting constituted a watershed moment for developing countries, as it laid the foundations for South-South Cooperation (SSC) and later initiatives such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77). This solidarity was predicated on the principles of self-determination and peaceful coexistence, aimed at fostering a "New International Economic Order". As De la Rasilla (2025) observes, the conference provided a gateway for post-colonial societies to assert national sovereignty, underscoring the discrepancy between their substantial demographic weight and their limited political influence within multilateral institutions.

Initially, SSC was rooted in the revolutionary fervour of anti-colonial solidarity and based on principles such as horizontality, partnership and knowledge sharing (Cheng et al., 2021). It departed from the "donor-recipient" relationship hierarchy towards "emancipatory, state-led development" and collective self-reliance among countries of the Global South. This early phase was not merely economic but profoundly political: it sought to restructure global governance and challenge systemic inequalities inherited from colonialism. In contrast, North-South Cooperation was defined as the unidirectional transfer of financial capital, technical expertise, and technology from the industrialised members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to the Global South—a vertical and paternalistic paradigm that reflected the acute asymmetric distribution of wealth and power. The structuralist school pioneered by Raúl Prebisch (1950) articulated the "dependency model", which posits that the wealth of richer nations is intrinsically predicated upon the underdevelopment of the Global South.

Initially, these countries positioned themselves as "rebels within the system", contesting the political and economic structures inherited from colonialism and the post-war international order (Zhou, 2024). However, over time, this stance evolved into one of "responsive participation" by engaging with existing institutions, and later into "active agents within the system", exercising greater influence over global governance (Ibid.). It was not until the 1990s that divergent economic trajectories towards modernisation were formalised and reinterpreted (Hart, 2009), leading to the institutionalisation of blocs such as IBSA and BRICS. A pivotal moment in this shift occurred at the 4th High Level Forum

on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011, which expanded the global framework to include "emerging powers" and South-South partners.

As defined by the United Nations, SSC emerged as "a manifestation of solidarity among peoples and countries of the South" grounded in shared objectives and common historical trajectories (UNOSSC, n.d.). In the contemporary era, however, this solidarity-driven cooperation has been instrumentalised in terms of strategic partnership and geopolitical interests. The Global South has grown increasingly heterogeneous, evolving into what a "two-speed Global South". This concept highlights a critical tension: while SSC positions itself as a normative alternative to Northern dynamics, it remains hampered by structural constraints—most notably asymmetric distribution of trade benefits and investment. The boundary between SSC and the traditional North-South cooperation model is, consequently, fading. The BRI in the Middle East can be seen as a contemporary form of South-South cooperation in that it links investment and infrastructure between countries of the Global South; however, its hierarchical nature and geostrategic dimension mean that classifying it as such remains a matter of academic debate (Baabood, 2024).

1.3 Narratives, Discursive Power, and Normative Competition in International Order Formation

Taken together, the dynamics described above indicate that the international order established in 1945 no longer adequately reflects the interests or influence of emerging actors. As periods of hegemonic decline often demonstrate, the erosion of a dominant power tends to generate systemic uncertainty and chaos (Galanis et al., 2024). This void has led to competing narratives on development, power and justice, because geopolitical narratives are key when talking about global ordering and disordering: they represent a specific vision of the global order, how it is envisioned and which actors are legitimised or even delegitimated (Jansen et al., 2023). Hence, they serve as an enriched tool to sustain or contest the current status quo. The global order is facing a crisis of political myths—understood as sacred narratives that legitimise power (Gellwitzki, 2025). Recent events evidence this: Donald Trump's implementation of tariffs is shattering the free trade myth; Russia's invasion of Ukraine has destroyed the national sovereignty principle; and Gaza exposes the fragility of the supposedly universal character of international norms (Ibid.).

Faced with any narrative proposed by an authority, the audience can either endorse it, thereby making it dominant, or challenge it and develop a counter-narrative. The latter is the case with revisionist states—conceptualised by Sánchez- Rodríguez (2024) as those "pursuing a subversive policy over the status quo and trying to implement [their] vision in the new world order to come". Counter-hegemonic imperatives directly fuel how China and Russia weaponise this rhetoric to erode the legitimacy of Western institutions, a dynamic that actively deepens global polarisation. A central tenet of this emergent alternative order is the rejection of universal values and political myths; in the absence of agreement among the international community, the sovereignty of states becomes the supreme value (Dezcallar, 2025). Holomar & Turner (2024) coined the term "narrative alliances" to describe how states coordinate their discourse to generate security and order while articulating mutual interests to defend themselves against a common threat. Politics and international communication have thus become a battlefield over who acquires credibility and "whose story wins" (Saliu, 2023).

The analysis of this competition, however, requires moving beyond material dominance to comprehend how ideas and language shape the perception of reality. Discursive power refers to the ability to shape how political and social reality is interpreted through language, symbols and shared meanings. Within the current liberal international order, a discursive competition persists regarding the legitimate meanings that structure global stability; thus, normative rivalry is essentially a struggle for discursive power. This struggle manifests as a systemic competition between the Western-led liberal order and an emerging Global South perspective that advocates for a multipolar distribution of power. A discrepancy has emerged between how states interpret ostensibly universal principles—such as sovereignty, territoriality, or human rights—and how they mobilise them to garner legitimacy. Far from being an exclusively political friction, this represents a fundamental crisis of meaning.

The nexus between language and political authority possesses a venerable philosophical lineage. In the *Cratylus*, Plato (ca. 360 B.C.E./1871) anticipated the political dimension of language through a dialectical tension between Hermogenes, who posits that meanings derive from social convention, and Cratylus, who asserts their inherent natural precision. Plato ultimately concludes that names are the artifice of a "lawgiver" (*nomothetes*), who thereby wields the sovereign power to delineate how society perceives and interprets reality. This tension between naturalism and conventionalism can be interpreted as an

early form of normative competition—a struggle to define what constitutes a legitimate use of language and, by extension, what counts as reality. Scholars like Foucault (1972) expand upon this by contending that discourse is not merely a medium for communication, but a system of power that dictates what can be said, who has the authority to speak, and what is accepted as "truth" within a given society. Miller (1990), in response to this premise, argues that whilst institutions exercise an undeniable invisible power, an objective truth exists and the subject retains the agency to reason for themselves. Power can therefore be not only coercive in a material sense, but productive, because it helps to fabricate the categories through which individuals and institutions conceive their realities.

Holzscheiter (2014) provides a useful clarification of the different ways in which discursive power can be studied in International Relations, distinguishing between approaches focused on micro-interaction and those focused on macro-structure. The former conceives discourse as communication in real time, where subjects create meaning through interaction; the latter sees discourse as a broader historical structure that shapes what can be said and even who can become a subject. Deliberative power, influenced by Habermas (1984), assumes that discourse may become a space where persuasion replaces coercion, whereas productive power, closer to Foucault (1982), emphasises that discourse itself is embedded in unequal relations that shape identities and possible actions. From this perspective, normative competition can be understood as the struggle between actors to make their values, principles and interpretations universally acceptable.

In practice, this competition is visible when different political communities attach different meanings to concepts such as sovereignty, legality, intervention, or peace. The same terms may be shared, yet their normative content may be profoundly contested. This is precisely why discourse matters: it is the arena in which normative hierarchies are built and challenged. Chinese foreign policy, in this regard, should be understood through what Gökcan (2025) identifies as a China-centric theoretical lens—one that looks through the concept of Tianxia ("all under heaven"), focused on universal harmony, rather than through Western-centric assumptions.

After the Second World War, foundational myths based on democracy, peace and institutional cooperation were established. Perhaps the novelty of the twenty-first century is that these myths dissolve while institutions remain standing—not through massive warfare, as historically occurred, but through the cumulative weight of contested

meaning. The proliferation of social media and the mass consumption of information further hinder the establishment of new global myths, deepening systemic instability.

1.4 China's Expanding Role and the Middle East as a Key Geopolitical Theatre

Over the past few decades, the Middle East's regional security environment has been characterized by persistent cycles of insecurity and instability, largely rooted in a historically fragile balance-of-power system (Hoffman, 2023). Expert analysts have always shown some difficulty when theorising and framing the dynamics of the region. The absence of a stable hegemonic order, combined with overlapping security dilemmas, has rendered the Middle East particularly resistant to traditional models of regional order.

Middle Eastern states have traditionally engaged in numerous tactics to block and isolate each other in multilateral and regional forums, leading to abrupt structural instability. These manoeuvres are fuelled by substantial internal capabilities, specifically the economic power ensured by the exploitation of energy resources, which in turn guarantees military power and ideological-religious power (Gonzalez, 2018). Paradoxically, China has successfully navigated these rivalries by maintaining simultaneous relations with competing actors. Beijing recognises that regional stability is a prerequisite for its own economic security ergo, the Middle East functions not only as a vital resource corridor but also as a potential source of direct threats to domestic security.

China accounts for just over 30% of global production and occupies a dominant position in sectors such as renewable energy, biotechnology and electric vehicles (Delage, 2025). To ensure uninterrupted access to critical inputs amidst escalating great-power tensions, Beijing has deepened strategic ties with key regional players, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. As a response, these countries have additionally diversified their foreign policies and adopted hedging behaviour to navigate the competition between the US and China, seeking to expand their alliances to maximise benefits and reduce risks (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025).

In short, these partnerships respond to three dimensions. The first corresponds to a geo-economic interest as it constitutes the largest source of crude oil imports (Toyoda, 2025). This dimension is the most tangible aspect of China's increased presence in the region. China became a net oil importer in 1993; and since then, half China's oil has come from

the Middle East. In order to receive this energy and crude oil, it has secured access through the Silk Road initiative in 2013, portraying it as an economic initiative for shared progress (Bhuiyan, 2024)

The second corresponds to diplomacy, through which China has presented itself as a guarantor of stability and a mediator. On 10 March 2023, Wang Yi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, announced in Beijing the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement (Escobar Stemmann & Arana, 2024). In December, China mediated the negotiation process successfully, leading to a series of bilateral negotiations of non-interference in internal affairs. China's diplomatic strategy relies heavily on bilateral engagement in infrastructure and investment, complemented by participation in regional forums such as the China-Arab Summit, engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the China-Central Asia Summit. Through these mechanisms, it seeks to erode the diplomatic influence of the United States as the primary provider of diplomatic and security-related public goods, thereby expanding its own strategic autonomy.

Finally, China's engagement also possesses a regulatory and normative dimension aligned with its broader geopolitical ambitions. The Belt and Road Initiative serves not only as an economic framework but as a vehicle for reasserting China's global status through extensive networks of infrastructure, transportation, energy, and trade linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. In doing so, the initiative contributes to the gradual construction of a more China-centric international order (Toyoda, 2025). Within this framework, China argues that its focus on economic development makes it a reliable partner in these uncertain times. What China offers to the developing world, in short, is a mix of economic investments, loans, trade and infrastructure without any political imposition, promoting "diverse paths to modernisation" and true multilateralism (Rudyak, 2023)

In light of these dynamics, this research aims to analyse how China's normative and economic expansion in the Middle East serves as a microcosm of the broader transition toward a post-liberal multipolar order.

1.5 Academic Approaches to China's Foreign Policy and Global Strategy

"The superior man seeks harmony but not uniformity."

—Confucius

Ideologues within the Chinese Communist Party believe that the new balance of power presents a unique opportunity for China (Dezcallar, 2025). That is why, navigating the tension between its historic commitment to non-interference and its newfound role as an assertive security provider, China's foreign policy has evolved into a sophisticated quest for "harmony without uniformity". China, hence, does not seek to challenge the international order, but rather pursues a cautious revisionism aimed at changing the system from within.

This approach aligns with the emergence of "deep pluralism", meaning, the transition towards a "global society in which power, wealth and (...) political authority are distributed diffusely within a system that has high interaction capacity and is strongly interdependent" (Zhang & Buzan, 2022). By asserting that global stability hinges on mutual sovereignty rather than systemic homogenisation, Beijing positions its strategy as a rejection of ideological hegemony in favour of a multipolar order defined by win-win cooperation.

China's foreign policy, notwithstanding, is deeply intertwined with the Chinese Communist Party's domestic insecurities and its obsession of "preserving its rule" (Chhabra & Hass, 2019). This explains one of the foundational cornerstones of China's foreign policy, the non-interference principle, under which a country shall not interfere or intervene in other countries' internal affairs. It was first coined by then-Premier of China Zhou Enlai in 1955, and since then it has been used as a diplomatic shield. However, in recent years as China's economic power has surged and its global influence has expanded, a robust domestic debate has emerged regarding the viability or sustainability of the Chinese doctrine regarding non-interference (Zheng, 2016).

Even though it is indispensable in terms of defending its state sovereignty and territorial integrity, the principle faces two main challenges: one regarding its expanding overseas interests—operating in highly volatile regions—, and secondly, due to the normative global shift, as it clashes with international expectations for China to act as a "responsible major power" (Ibid.). This shift towards a more proactive foreign policy was evident in

the publication of the “Global Security Initiative” in 2023 and most notably, in its increasingly active approach to foreign disputes and conflicts. This approach entailed China abandoning the UN shield and presenting itself as a free agent in global security (Sciorati, 2023). Alongside the other two global initiatives, China offers a tangible path “to tackle urgent global problems and a strategic vision for a shared future” (People’s Daily Online, 2025)

This free agency, along with its traditional “wait-and-see” approach, has demonstrated its vulnerability to local political turmoil. Nevertheless, under the GSI, China has positioned itself as a neutral facilitator rather than an interventionist power. By institutionalising peaceful resolution through bodies like the International Organisation for Mediation (IOmed), Beijing has projected an image of impartiality that expands its influence, especially across countries of the Global South.

The institutionalisation of dispute settlement holds substantial strategic value, as it not only safeguards the continuity of energy supply but also contributes to regional stability, thereby creating favourable conditions for the advancement of Belt and Road initiative infrastructure projects (Yuliantoro, 2025). Among its many high-profile achievements, the mediation between Saudi-Arabia and Iran’s rapprochement in 2023, successfully restoring diplomatic relations between historical rivals (Escobar Stemmann & Arana, 2024). Finally, one of the keys to the success of Chinese diplomacy has been the principle of non-conditionality—which excludes democratisation objectives from its loans and aid—in order to win the support of developing countries, particularly non-democratic regimes.

While Dezcallar (2025) identifies the mastery of emerging technologies and the strategic displacement of U.S. hegemony in Asia as immediate priorities, academic literature suggests these are components of a broader, systemic balancing strategy. According to Wang (2023), these ambitions represent a hierarchy of interests where technical self-reliance and regional stability serve as vital, short-term objectives necessary to anchor China’s global projection. This process is fundamentally characterized by internal balancing—strengthening domestic capabilities to close the power gap—and external balancing, achieved through the cultivation of deep interdependence with the Global South.

However, as Zhang and Buzan (2022) argue, this pursuit is not necessarily a bid for absolute global military parity in the traditional sense. Instead, it represents a quest for 'consensual pluralism', seeking international recognition for diverse political systems and a shift toward a world order where Washington respects the legitimacy of the Chinese model. This strategic restraint is particularly evident in the South China Sea; while it remains a flashpoint for sovereignty and maritime trade—carrying 65% of global commerce and critical semiconductor supplies—Beijing's actions are often interpreted not as a desire for total war, but as a calibrated effort to impose limits on U.S. naval dominance while safeguarding the economic foundations of its 'National Rejuvenation' (Dezcallar, 2025). In his speech to the BRI forum, Xi Jinping outlined how the initiative's future will focus on green energy and telecommunications infrastructure (Ibid.)

To sustain this strategic vision, China has embarked on an extensive re-armament program. Its 2024 defence budget increased by 5.2% to approximately \$231 billion, focusing on modernization and high-tech warfare (U.S. Department of Defence, 2025). In 2025, China announced a 7.2% increase in its defence budget to about \$249 billion (Government of China, 2025). In the nuclear domain, the U.S. Department of Defence highlights a significant shift: China is projected to expand its arsenal from approximately 600 operational warheads to over 1,000 by 2030 (Ibid.). This military build-up serves as a clear manifestation of internal balancing, designed to deter external intervention in China's "core interests."

Recognising the impracticality of achieving military hegemony over the US, China pivoted toward economic agreements and strategic partnerships as its primary lever of influence. Without relinquishing any of the traditional dimensions of power (given that its military capabilities are growing exponentially), it has chosen to prioritise the economic and diplomatic fronts. Through its distinctive "trade diplomacy", Beijing has emerged as the world's leading economy, its largest creditor, and the primary trading partner for over 120 countries by 2024 (Borreguero, 2025). As Wang (2023) argues, Beijing's external engagement is fundamentally rooted in securing growth, stability and access to resources—a logic epitomised by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Ultimately, the BRI does more than facilitate global infrastructure; it serves as a strategic vehicle that consolidates China's status as the world's preeminent trading power and creditor

In short, China's strategy does not seek to challenge the international order, but rather to transform it from within. By introducing concepts such as 'building a shared future for

humanity’, it is cautiously attempting to reshape the discourse, alter regulatory frameworks and, consequently, introduce its own: without democracy, human rights or conditionalities. Some argue that China has moved away from this “hide and bide” phase and transitioned into a more assertive stance by projecting its power and pursuing its territorial interests (Chhabra & Hass, 2019).

II. Theoretical Framework

a. Framing theory: the strategic reconstruction of Global Order

“Communication does not stand apart from reality. There is not, first, reality and then, second, communication. Communication participates in the formulization and change of reality.”

Richard Ericson (1998)

The analytical framework of Framing Theory offers a crucial lens for interpreting the strategic development and contestation of meaning within global rivalries. In the contemporary era, international friction is no longer limited to physical battlegrounds; it has fundamentally migrated toward the informational domain. This has brought about a shift in the nature of global power, in which victory does not depend on whose army wins, but on whose story wins (Nye, 2014). Thus, the ability to define reality—which problems are visible, which actors legitimate, and which solutions are suitable—has become a central instrument of geopolitical competition. States have started to weaponize information to align public perception with their strategic interests. It is within this context that Framing Theory emerges as an indispensable analytical tool for the study of China’s discursive strategy in the Middle East.

Framing Theory has its intellectual roots in sociology, communication studies, and political science, though its foundational formulation is attributed to the sociologist Erving Goffman. In his work *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (1974), Goffman introduced the concept of “frame” to refer to the cognitive schemata through which individuals organise, interpret, and make sense of social experiences. For Goffman, these frames are not neutral containers of information; they are principles of organisation that govern how events are perceived and what meaning is assigned to them. Frames operate largely beneath our consciousness—they are taken-for-granted structures that make certain interpretations of reality appear self-evident. Schutz

(1993) emphasised the existence of diverse “experiential realms” through which each individual constructs a subjective understanding of the world.

This foundational insight was taken up and systematised in the field of communication studies by Entman (1993). He theorised that to frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993). He expanded on this idea by identifying four essential functions of a frame: defining a problem, diagnosing its causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting solutions (Entman, 1993).

According to this model, the essence of framing lies in selection and salience. To frame, in other words, is to choose elements of reality and make them more noticeable or memorable to the audience. This “salience” ensures that specific interpretations remain dominant in the public’s memory, turning frames into sites of symbolic struggle where ideologies clash (Nye, 2014). Frames serve as the cognitive instrument that both media and individuals utilise to process and evaluate information (Neuman et al., 1992). In this light, media framing is defined by how information is organised to influence the interpretation of global issues (Zaklana, 2025).

The theory was further developed in the sociological study of social movements by Snow and Benford (1988), who introduced the concept of “collective action frames” to describe the interpretive schemas through which movements mobilise support, construct collective identities, and contest dominant representations of social reality. Snow and Benford (1988) argued that the success of any mobilisation effort depends fundamentally on the resonance of its frames — on the degree to which they align with the beliefs, experiences, and identities of the audiences they seek to persuade.

In Entman's (2004) cascading activation model, frames are conceived as flowing downward from political elites to the media and then to audiences, though the process is neither linear nor guaranteed; journalists and publics retain the capacity to resist, modify, or counter the frames that powerful actors seek to impose. This model renders visible the structural dimension of framing: not all actors possess equal capacity to frame events. The competition over interpretive dominance is itself a manifestation of power asymmetries within and between political systems. Hence, instead of serving as passive observers of global events, states play an intentional and constitutive role in

manufacturing social reality (Carter, 2013). This is achieved through the selective highlighting, omission, or downplaying of specific facts.

The core tenet of Framing Theory—originally introduced by Gregory Bateson (1955) and expanded by Neuman et al. (1992)—suggests that any single issue can be interpreted through a multitude of perspectives. Early research into public opinion in the mid-20th century revealed that the so-called “framing effects” were more influential than raw facts (Chong & Druckman, 2007), which do not necessarily change a person’s core values, but they significantly shift the importance assigned to different considerations.

Modern Framing Theory has thus evolved to address the intersection of power and political dominance. Gamson (1992) posited that frames reflect specific ideologies rather than objective truths. Today, neutrality is often overshadowed by narratives that prioritize national interests or geopolitical alliances as they are used to shape the normative landscape of global politics. In this regard, this theory intersects directly with Nye’s (2014) concept of soft power, that is, the capacity to attract and persuade to make one’s own preference appear desirable to others. Such narrative control can dictate the success of conflict resolution, the marginalization of certain actors, and the overall legitimacy of a political theory.

In the context of this research, Framing Theory is essential to analyse how China strategically reconstructs the global order by selecting and making salient specific aspects of the "Global South" identity. China utilizes framing to promote a particular "problem definition" regarding Western hegemony while offering "treatment recommendations" through its Global Development, Security, and Civilization Initiatives. By emphasizing principles like non-intervention and shared development, Beijing constructs a "social representation" of the Global South that challenges the liberal status quo.

The concept of “global order” refers not merely to the distribution of military and economic capabilities among states, but to the normative architecture that organises international day-to-day dynamics: rules, institutions, norms or more importantly, hierarchies of legitimacy. While these historical struggles over meaning and representation are inherently contested through discourse, they assume a tangible dimension in contemporary geopolitics. It is through this lens that one can execute a deep deconstruction of how China’s strategic narratives are designed to penetrate regional

social representations, positioning Beijing as the legitimate alternative to the West in the Middle East.

b. Critical Discourse Analysis: power, ideology and social actors.

"In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult... A set of actions upon other actions."

Foucault, 1982

It is widely acknowledged that discourse has never been a neutral reflection of reality. Language constitutes a medium through which societies construct meaning, negotiate power, and shape collective understandings of the world. Departing from Foucault's (1972) insistence that discourse operates far beyond a transparent medium for pre-existing communication—functioning instead as a productive, non-neutral force that actively manufactures the objects, subjects, and power relations it claims to merely describe—Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a critical perspective on language with the main purpose of examining the relationship between discourse, power and social inequality.

Wodak and Meyer (2009) rejected the idea that CDA merely describes linguistic phenomena: for these authors, CDA entails an explicit normative stance, as it critiques and exposes the ways in which language reproduces or challenges structures of domination. This view implies a dialectical relationship between language and social structure: discourse is shaped by the social conditions in which it is produced, but it simultaneously reproduces, legitimises, or contests those conditions.

Fairclough (1992) develops this insight systematically, arguing that every discursive event should be understood as a social action embedded in broader institutional and cultural contexts, where it actively contributes to the construction of social reality. CDA's understanding of power extends well beyond direct coercion of state authority (Caballero Mengíbar, 2015). Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, CDA scholars understand power as the capacity to secure the consent of subordinate groups through the naturalisation of particular worldviews, values, and social arrangements—materialised through the subtle shaping of what appears natural, or even inevitable. Sonny Osman

(2025) conceptualised (coercive) tolerance to explain compulsory behaviour towards policies established through the discourse of the great powers.

Van Dijk (1993) formalises this position by defining discourse-based power as control over text and talk—control that is not only material but cognitive, insofar as elite groups shape the mental models through which subordinate groups make sense of their social world.

Another key element within the CDA framework is ideology, understood not as a set of explicit political beliefs but as the cognitive and social structures through which power relations are naturalised and reproduced. Ideologies, as van Dijk (1998) argues, function as the organising principles of the social representations shared by members of social groups—axiomatic frameworks that make certain interpretations of reality appear self-evident while rendering alternatives invisible or illegitimate. Ideological effects are most powerful when least visible: when they operate not as doctrines to be consciously endorsed but as taken-for-granted assumptions structuring everyday perception and judgement.

CDA takes as one of its primary tasks the denaturalisation of such ideological assumptions, exposing the constructed and interested character of what presents itself as neutral or objective. Fairclough (1988) argued that without a description and theorisation of political, economic and social processes and structures, the sources of production of meaning could not be provided; accordingly, the different approaches within discourse theory should not be understood as mutually exclusive frameworks, but integrated into an interdisciplinary methodological framework that enables a more comprehensive analysis.

A) Teun A. van Dijk: The Socio-Cognitive Approach

Among the foundational theorists of CDA, Teun A. van Dijk has made one of the most systematic contributions through the development of what he terms the socio-cognitive approach. This framework rests on the conviction that neither purely linguistic nor purely sociological analysis is sufficient to account for the ways in which discourse reproduces social inequality. What is required, van Dijk (1993, 2008) argues, is a model that integrates the analysis of discourse structures, cognitive mechanisms, and social relations into a coherent analytical framework—represented as a triangle whose three vertices are discourse, cognition, and society.

The cognitive dimension is perhaps the most distinctive feature of van Dijk's approach. He argues that the relationship between discourse and society is not direct but mediated by mental models—the subjective, context-dependent representations that individuals construct to understand specific communicative situations (van Dijk, 1998). These models are shaped by socially shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies that members of a given group internalise through participation in dominant discursive practices. As a consequence, ideological effects do not operate solely through the imposition of explicit content, but through the gradual shaping of the interpretive frameworks through which individuals process their experience of the social world. Elite groups, by controlling access to dominant forms of discourse—political speech, news media, legal and educational texts—are thereby in a position to influence the mental models of vast audiences, reproducing in the process the structures of power from which they benefit.

To operationalise this asymmetry, this research draws on van Dijk's (1998, 2006) ideological square, a framework designed to deconstruct how discourse systematically biases the representation of the in-group versus the out-group. This model operates through four complementary moves:

- a. The positive self-presentation of the in-group
- b. The negative other-presentation of the out-group
- c. The mitigation of the in-group's negative attributes
- d. The mitigation of the out-group's positive attributes

These four strategies work in concert to produce a morally asymmetrical representation of social reality—one in which the in-group's dominance appears justified and the out-group's resistance or claims appear inherently illegitimate. In the context of the present study, this framework offers a particularly precise analytical instrument for deconstructing the binary opposition that China systematically constructs between South-South solidarity and Western hegemony, tracing how Beijing foregrounds its own cooperative and development-oriented identity while consistently framing the West as interventionist, extractive, and normatively discredited.

At the micro-linguistic level, this ideological structure is enacted through a range of specific discursive choices. Lexical selection encodes evaluative positions that naturalise particular ideological frameworks; syntactic choices, such as the systematic use of passive constructions to conceal agency or active constructions to foreground it, shape the

attribution of responsibility in discourse; and rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, understatement, and appeals to historical authority all contribute to the realisation of the ideological square at the surface level of text (van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk's key contribution lies in demonstrating that these micro-level choices are not arbitrary stylistic preferences, but systematic expressions of underlying ideological structures that connect specific linguistic forms to the macro-level dynamics of social power and inequality.

A final element van Dijk analyses is manipulation, defined as "a form of social abuse, cognitive mind control and discursive interaction" (van Dijk, 2006). Discourse enables political elites to exert a form of illegitimate influence over the audience's processes of understanding. What separates manipulation from ordinary persuasion is the passivity of the audience: because recipients fail to see the speaker's true motives, they become victims of the discourse rather than active participants. Van Dijk further argues that manipulation should be judged not by the intentions of the speaker but by its actual impact on society.

B) Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer: The Discourse-Historical Approach

A second major contribution to the CDA tradition is the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), developed principally by Ruth Wodak in collaboration with Michael Meyer and other scholars at the Vienna School. The DHA shares with van Dijk's approach a commitment to the critical analysis of power and ideology, but places a particular emphasis on the historical and intertextual dimensions of discursive practice, insisting that discourse can only be adequately understood when situated within its specific socio-political and historical context (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Jäger (2001) builds upon this perspective by arguing that reality is not reflected in our consciousness; rather, it is our consciousness that allocates meaning to reality.

CDA, within this framework, requires a hermeneutic process that utilises "triangulation"—evaluating findings from different theoretical and methodological perspectives to minimise bias and validate interpretations (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This principle reflects the DHA's conviction that the most rigorous analysis emerges from the convergence of methodological perspectives, contributing both as an epistemological safeguard and as a strategy that enriches the interpretive process.

The DHA further proposes that discourse should be analysed at four interrelated levels of context: the immediate co-text; the level of intertextual and interdiscursive relationships;

extralinguistic and institutional variables, including the social positions of participants and the material conditions of text production and reception; and the broader socio-political and historical context, which situates discourse within the long-term dynamics of power, conflict, and social change (Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The analytical movement between these four levels is what gives the DHA its characteristic depth, connecting specific textual features to the historical processes that condition them.

Within this framework, Wodak identified five principal discursive strategies through which power relations are constructed, legitimised, or contested. Nomination concerns how social actors, objects, and phenomena are named and categorised through discourse. Predication attributes qualities or features to those already nominated—in politics, frequently used to create stereotypes. Argumentation provides reasoning strategies that justify or delegitimise particular claims, conferring legitimacy and credibility. Finally, perspectivisation and intensification are the strategies through which social actors represent events and deploy rhetorical devices such as intensifiers and euphemisms to evaluate discursive claims (Wodak, 2001). Together, these five strategies provide a comprehensive analytical vocabulary for examining how discourse participates in the construction and reproduction of social power.

C) Theo van Leeuwen: The Representation of Social Actors

Theo van Leeuwen's approach is concerned with the representation of social actors. In his seminal work *Discourse and Practice* (2008), he developed a model that explains how language reveals or conceals individuals or social groups, thereby influencing our perception of reality, power, and ideology. Moving away from traditional grammar, the framework centres on two main strategies—exclusion and inclusion—and emphasises the strict distinction between participation in a social practice and representing it in discourse, with these practices later translated through a recontextualising filter.

Structural censorship is just as analytically significant as the presence of dominant actors: Bourdieu (1991) understood how power manifests not only through who speaks and what they say, but also in the capacity to decide which topics are worthy of debate. Foucault (1972) adds that ideology is best concealed in what is deliberately silenced.

Social actors may be excluded from a representation either through suppression—in which the actor is absent from both text and recoverable background—or through backgrounding, in which the actor is not mentioned directly but may be inferred from

contextual knowledge (van Leeuwen, 1996). The decision to exclude a social actor is never ideologically neutral: it reflects particular understandings of social relevance, agency, legitimacy and accountability.

When social actors are included, the framework distinguishes between the roles they are assigned. The dimension of activation versus passivation concerns whether actors are represented as active agents who initiate social processes, or as passive recipients of the actions of others (van Leeuwen, 1996). The systematic passivation of particular social groups constructs them as objects of social forces rather than as subjects capable of self-determination, thereby naturalising subordination. Conversely, the activation of powerful institutions or states attributes to them an agentive authority that legitimises their actions.

Van Leeuwen's framework further distinguishes between genericization—the representation of social actors as members of a category rather than as named individuals—and specification, which identifies particular individuals by name or individualising attributes. Genericization can serve to dehumanise or homogenise social groups, while specification can personalise and humanise authority. Related to this is the distinction between functionalisation, which represents social actors in terms of the roles they fulfil, and identification, which represents them in terms of what they are—their national, ethnic, political, or other social identity (van Leeuwen, 1996). Together, these representational choices constitute a system through which discourses construct and naturalise social identities and power relations.

Taken together, the three theoretical frameworks reviewed in this section constitute the analytical architecture upon which the present study is built. Each approach contributes a distinct but complementary analytical dimension to the study of discourse, power, and ideology.

III. Objectives and hypothesis

The main objective of this study is to examine how China strategically deploys the discourse of the Global South to construct itself as a normatively superior alternative to the Western liberal order in the Middle East. The originality of this study lies in its analysis of a subtler communicative mechanism: rather than directly confronting the Western-led international order, Beijing constructs an alternative normative framework

through which it positions itself as superior and more legitimate partner for Middle Eastern states.

This approach is grounded in the assumption that China's influence in the Middle East cannot be reduced to its material and economic presence alone. Rather, influence is exerted through indirect framing strategies in which narratives of South-South solidarity, historical victimhood and civilizational plurality create interpretative spaces that reshape how regional actors perceive the international order and their place within it. In this context, China's foreign policy communications—across multilateral forums, bilateral diplomacy, and its three global initiatives—operate not merely as policy statements, but as instruments for the construction of an alternative geopolitical worldview and a counter-hegemonic political identity.

More broadly, this study seeks to explore how strategic narratives serve as tools of normative contestation, capable of reshaping the foundations upon which international legitimacy is constructed and disputed.

To achieve this overarching goal, the study pursues several specific objectives:

The primary objective is to deconstruct the dominant frame within China's foreign policy communications tailored for the Middle East. This process demands a critical evaluation of the strategic definition of the "Global South" as a political identity. It also implies uncovering the discursive mechanisms that draw boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate international actors, alongside the specific moral evaluations that anchor Beijing's regional rhetoric. This leads to a first hypothesis: China systematically employs a solidarity frame that constructs a binary opposition between a predatory, interventionist West and a cooperative, development-oriented Global South, within which it positions itself as the natural leading voice (H.1).

Second, the analysis will examine how China constructs moral asymmetry in relation to Western powers, focusing on how historical grievances—are instrumentalised to delegitimise the liberal international order. A central hypothesis of this work is that the primary function of China's Global South narrative is not to propose a coherent ideological alternative, but to erode the moral authority of Western institutions, thereby generating a legitimacy vacuum that Beijing moves strategically to occupy (H.2).

Third, the study will analyse how the principles of sovereignty and non-interference are deployed not merely as diplomatic commitments, but as discursive weapons that simultaneously appeal to Middle Eastern political sensibilities and reframe China's own expansionary ambitions as benign and development-driven. This points toward a final hypothesis of normative substitution: that by appropriating and redefining the vocabulary of the liberal order, China fosters a gradual reconfiguration of the normative consensus through which regional states evaluate their international partnerships, displacing Western frameworks without openly rejecting them (H.3). Finally, the aim is to assess the broader implications of this discursive strategy for the current transition toward a multipolar international order and for the legitimacy of the liberal international order itself.

IV. Methodology

This research will adopt a qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in discourse analysis. Given that the central object of study is China's strategic use of language and narrative to construct a particular image of the Global South in the Middle East, a quantitative approach would be insufficient to capture the ideological and performative dimensions of political speech.

The primary analytical framework, as previously mentioned, is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This thesis has presented three complementary approaches: Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, which examines how elite discourse reproduces and legitimises ideological structures through his concept of "Ideological Square"; Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer's discourse-historical approach, which situates texts within their broader socio-political and historical context; and Theo van Leeuwen's framework for the representation of social actors, which traces how Chinese discourse constructs categories such as "the Global South", "the West" and "developing nations".

However, while all three traditions offer valuable analytical tools, this research will focus on van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, as it is the most pertinent framework for the purposes of this study. His work analyses how elite discourse strategically constructs ideological representations. This aligns directly with the research objective of examining how China designs Global South narrative to reshape the social cognition of Middle Eastern audiences and delegitimise the Western liberal order.

This is complemented by Entman's Framing Theory to assess how China selects, makes salient, and organises specific elements of reality across its foreign policy communications. The dispute over meanings is not merely academic; it has direct practical implications for the architecture of global governance.

The corpus is constructed across two analytical levels. At the macro level, the research examines three foundational Chinese foreign policy initiatives: The Global Security Initiative (2022), the Global Development Initiative (2021), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (2023). At the meso level, it analyses speeches delivered by President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Qiang in multilateral regional forums, including the China-Arab Summit or the China-GCC Summit, among others. This multi-level design allows for a systematic examination of how China's Global South narrative operates across different institutional registers and audiences.

The operationalisation of this framework will follow a structured analytical sequence applied across both levels of the corpus. First, the ideological square will be operationalised through the systematic identification of actors named or implied within each text, mapping how the in-group and the out-group are constructed and evaluated. This is complemented by a qualitative pronominal analysis of the first-and third-person plural markers ("we" vs "they"). Second, problem definition and causal attribution are operationalised, examining how each text constructs specific issues as problems, which causes are attributed explicitly or through strategic silence, and whose actors are positioned as responsible or victims. Lastly, metaphors and analogies are identified and categorised, examining how abstract political and ideological positions are naturalised through organic, mechanical, or culturally specific imagery. The elaboration of Figures provided in this research has been manually coded.

These three analytical operations are applied first to the macro-level corpus (the three Global Initiatives) and subsequently to the meso-level corpus (China's speeches at regional multilateral forums), allowing for a comparative assessment of how the ideological square, problem definition, and metaphorical framing operate across different institutional registers and audiences.

V. Development and discussion

a) Macro Level: Global Initiatives and the Cognition of a New Paradigm

I. The Global Architecture of Meaning: Deconstructing Global Security, Development, and Civilisation Initiatives

Since 2021, China has launched three major global frameworks: Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). While they are believed to represent China's contribution "to addressing transnational challenges through multilateral cooperation" (People's Daily Online, 2025) they constitute what this research conceptualises as China's global architecture of meaning. Their relevance lies in how the Chinese government responds to critical contemporary tensions: the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the pursuit of national security and geopolitical tensions or the binary clash between autocracy and democracy (Ibid.).

Individually, each initiative operates as a self-contained policy framework; collectively, they form an interlocking discursive strategy designed to challenge the normative foundations of the Western-led liberal international order (LIO) and position Beijing as the preeminent articulator of an alternative global paradigm. To deconstruct this architecture is to expose the ideological labour that these texts perform—the selective framings, strategic silences, and terminological appropriations through which China reshapes the cognitive domain upon which global governance is contested. With the specific lexical choices and representational frames development is decoupled from governance conditionality; security is redefined through the lens of multipolarity, and civilizational diversity is mobilised to legitimise political pluralism and beyond democratic norms.

- **Global Development Initiative (GDI).** It was launched by President Xi Jinping at the 76th UN General Assembly in 2021, the GDI's core discursive power lies in its ability to invoke the familiar vocabulary of Western development frameworks, with concepts such as "shared progress", "win-win cooperation", "people-centred development" while systematically evacuating their governance content. By decoupling development from democratic conditionality and

recentring it on aggregate economic outcomes, Beijing operationalises a "do-as-I-do" paradigm that presents China's own trajectory of rapid growth without democratisation as proof of concept, offering an alternative model that is structurally compatible with the political self-determination of recipient states (Garlick, 2024).

- **Global Security Initiative (GSI).** It was published by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2023, the GSI's discursive function is to reposition Beijing from a rising challenger to an anti-hegemonic stabiliser. By recontextualising the principle of "indivisible security" to implicitly frame US-led alliance systems as the primary source of global instability — without directly naming them — and by leveraging the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement as empirical validation, the GSI performs a fundamental inversion: it is not China that threatens the existing order, but the interventionist logic of Western security architecture that does.
- **Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI).** It was proposed in March 2023, the GCI's discursive power resides in its capacity to attack not specific Western policies, but the epistemic foundations upon which those policies claim legitimacy. By mobilising "civilizational diversity" and "harmony without uniformity" as organising principles, it reframes democratic universalism as civilizational imperialism, transforming the defence of non-liberal political systems into an exercise of legitimate self-determination; and in doing so, it offers MENA governments a normative vocabulary to articulate their own political legitimacy entirely outside the hierarchy of liberal internationalism.

II. The Ideological Square and the definition of actors throughout the Global Initiatives

Having established the discursive function of each initiative, the following analysis operationalises van Dijk's Ideological Square to examine how these text construct social actors—a structure field of named and unnamed subjects whose representation is governed (Van Dijk, 1998). Once these actors have been identified, it becomes possible to dismantle the ideological discursive reproduction produced through the polarization of a "positive us" and a "negative them."

This frame, of “us vs them” can lead to the perception of any confrontation as “nationalistic, crisis-driven, win-lose situation and the attribution of blame to specific values (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). In this regard, China argues that global development is in crisis due to external contingencies and presents these Global Initiatives and its guiding principles as morally unquestionable. Not only that, but it can even desensitise the audience to the suffering of the adversary, creating a public opinion that is passive in the face of the mistakes committed towards them (Nagar and Maoz, 2017).

This ideological polarization is therefore a prominent feature of the ideological landscape. Collective identity reduces feelings of isolation, as individuals feel they are part of something larger. As a result, it facilitates cooperation and collective action within a specific group. The Chinese government bases its legitimacy on representing “the people” and countries victimized by the West, where its decisions are more readily accepted and justified. The sense of belonging to a “specific side” positions him as a defender of the nation, the people, or even certain values that are threatened by that dangerous and corrupt “other.” Furthermore, this tool helps simplify complex messages and strengthens emotional bonds within one’s own group.

Figure 1 maps the actors explicitly named across the three initiatives, together with the evaluative frameworks through which they are characterised.

Figure 1: Actors throughout GDI, GSI, GCI

Actors	Quote
Human Society (GDI)	<i>“Development is the eternal pursuit of human society”</i>
People everywhere (GDI)	<i>“... people everywhere strongly aspire to achieve a better life through sustainable development”</i>
Emerging market countries (GDI)	<i>“... slowed down the economic growth of emerging market countries”</i>

Developing countries (GDI, GSI, GCI)	<i>“... provide new opportunities for developing countries’ leapfrog development”/ “... developing countries are confronted with mounting challenges as they seek recovery from the pandemic.”</i>
Least developed, small island, landlocked (GDI, GSI)	<i>“pay attention to the special development difficulties of developing countries, especially the least developed countries, small island developing states, and landlocked developing countries...”</i>
North and South (GDI)	<i>“the development divide between the North and the South continues to deepen”</i>
United Nations (GDI, GSI)	<i>“... support the United Nations in playing a coordinating role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda”</i>
International Community	<i>“...the international community is confronted with multiple risks and challenges rarely seen before.”</i>
All civilisations (GCI)	<i>“All civilizations created by human society are splendid.”</i>
The frontrunners (GCI)	<i>“The frontrunners should sincerely support other countries in their development.”</i>
Humanity/ Mankind (GSI)	<i>“Humanity is an indivisible security community.” / “...foster a community of shared security for mankind...”</i>

This figure has revealed three structurally significant patterns. First, the ingroup is constructed through a logic of graduated universalism: actors are named at progressively levels of vulnerability: from inclusive “human society”, “people everywhere” to

particular “developing countries”, “emerging market countries” or “least developed, small island, and landlocked countries”. This constitutes a powerful political tool: it broadens possible moral constituency for China’s initiatives while simultaneously directing normative attention toward actors most likely to be perceived as exclusionary in Western-led frameworks. The ingroup is consistently presented as morally coherently and “structurally deserving”.

What has been identified is that Chinese Global Initiatives do not explicitly name this so-called “them.” As established in the document analysis above, the out-group—broadly identifiable as the Western liberal order and its institutions—operates through implication, omission, and structural contrast rather than through direct attribution. These linguistic characteristics have been shown to establish identity, solidarity, and opposition, with the ultimate aim of changing public opinion and garnering support for that “we” (Hristova, 2024). However, some references are established “*the development divide between the North and South continues to deepen*”; “*the international community is confronted with multiple risks and challenges rarely seen before*” or “*the frontrunners should sincerely support other countries in their development*”, without attributing blame through direct nomination. By allocating the causes of global crisis unnamed, the discourse appears to be neutral and universalist acquiring legitimacy.

Moreover, the United Nations has a strong discursive presence, both by appearing in the GDI and GSI. It is presented as “*central, legitimate orchestrator of multilateral efforts*” to act as a legitimising tool for China’s initiatives, while subtly repositioning China as its indispensable guarantor.

Figure 2. Pronominal Frequency and Ingroup/Outgroup Orientation across the GDI, GSI, and GCI

<i>GDI</i>	<i>GSI</i>	<i>GCI</i>
<i>We (14)</i>	<i>We (8)</i>	<i>We (37)</i>
<i>They (1)</i>	<i>They (2)</i>	<i>They (5)</i>

Across all three initiatives, first-person plural markers (“we”) vastly outnumber third-person markers (“they”). In this sense, this research has identified the near-total suppression of explicit outgroup nomination: the minimal frequency of “they” across all three texts confirms that the negative other-presentation identified in Figure 1. This is due

the discursive choice that maintains the surface appearance of universalism while preserving the underlying binary logic of the Ideological Square of North vs South. And secondly, the ingroup self-reference, especially in the GCI is not incidental, but rather philosophical: it aspires to this identity-constructing process. It saturates the text with the use of pronominal “we” to reinforce collective belonging and civilizational solidarity that the initiative claims to represent.

III. Definition of the Problem and Causal Attribution: Development Gaps, Security Threats, and Civilizational Pluralism as Systematic Failures

The analytical significance of the problem definition lies in understanding how policies should be analysed not as responses to objective problems, but as practices that produce specific representations of those problems. In his acclaimed work *What’s the Problem Represented to be?* Bacchi (2012) established that it is these policies and politics that contain implicit representations of what is considered to be the problem.

It is for this reason that, by analysing this definition of the problem across the three Global Initiatives, the research can identify how China constructs its political reality, what it considers a threat, challenge or opportunity, and even which solutions it legitimises on the basis of that definition. Once it is understood that problems do not exist as objective facts, but are constructed discursively, China’s strategic priorities become clearer. Not only that, but it also establishes which actors are portrayed as responsible and which as victims; and the construction of a legitimate framework for implementing specific policies to resolve the issue.

Figure 3. GDI Problem definition

Problem	Quote
The Pandemic’s impact	<i>"...the pandemic drags on and rebounds, presenting severe challenges to the global implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic has wiped out the global poverty reduction achievements made over the past 10 years..."</i>

Resource and Global Divides	<i>"Digital divide is growing, the gap in development resources is increasing, and the 'development divide' between the North and the South continues to deepen."</i>
Vaccine Inequity	<i>"Realizing fair and equitable distribution of vaccines around the world is a long and arduous task, and developing countries are confronted with mounting challenges..."</i>
Domestic and International Inequality	<i>"...addressing the uneven and inadequate development among and within countries."</i>
Food insecurity	<i>"Issues like food security pose severe challenges."</i>
Economic Vulnerability	<i>"...with a focus on people relapsing or falling into poverty due to the pandemic, especially those in developing countries."</i>

China has managed to avoid treating problems as self-evident, as this can pose a risk in the evaluation process (Archibald, 2020). Ultimately, it is the ‘definition of the problem’ that forms the cornerstone of any country’s political agenda and the resulting public policies designed to resolve it. In light of this, Stone (1989) argues that actors in the international community compete to impose causal narratives, that is, stories that explain who caused the problem and who should solve it. China makes evident use of this in issues such as Taiwan, security in the Asia-Pacific, climate change or even global governance. Defining a problem is in fact attributing a causal relationship; it allows one to blame one group for the suffering of another, shifting the problem into the realm of human agency (Stone, 1989).

Figure 3 (GDI problem definition) highlights six problem categories through which the initiative defines the contemporary development crisis. All of them hiding the same message: the existing global development architecture has failed, and its failure is concentrated in the Global South. As a result, the pandemic is defined as “*persistent, regressive force*” that actively dismantled a decade of anti-poverty milestones; vaccine

inequity is framed as “*a long and arduous task*” that disproportionately burdens developing nations; the North-South divide is described as “*intensifying*” and “*widening*”; and economic vulnerability is represented as the risk of immediate relapse into poverty for the most marginalised populations. Finally, the initiative is seen to depoliticise the priority areas it sets out, with the aim of treating development as a purely technical or infrastructure-management issue. In doing so, it deliberately overlooks elements such as human rights, democracy and labour rights, which lie at the heart of Western conditionality.

The causal agent of this failure is, however, never named. But this could be considered a strategically constitutive silence, meaning, by defining the problem as structural (a widening gap, a deepening divide, a growing digital inequality) can lead to an indirect attribution towards the western-led international order.

Figure 4: GSI Problem definition

Problem category	Exact Quote
Systemic Global Stagnation	<i>"...our world, our times and history are changing in ways like never before..." / "...the world is once again at a crossroads in history."</i>
The Four Deficits	<i>"The deficits in peace, development, security and governance are growing..."</i>
Entwined Threats	<i>"Regional security hotspots keep flaring up, local conflicts and turbulence occur frequently, the COVID-19 pandemic persists... and traditional and non-traditional security threats are entwined."</i>
Geopolitical Malpractices	<i>"The Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism contradict the spirit of the UN Charter and must be resisted and rejected."</i>

Sanction abuse	<i>"Abusing unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction does not solve a problem, but only creates more difficulties and complications."</i>
Economic Weaponization	<i>"...avoid politicizing and weaponizing food security issues."</i>
Space Proliferation	<i>"...the risk of nuclear war" / "Resolutely reject the weaponization of and arms race in outer space..."</i>

Following Bacchi's (2012) foundational insight that policies respond to specific representations of problems, the question this section addresses is not what the problems are, but how they are presented—and crucially, what those representations presuppose, silence and legitimate. The three initiatives examined here deploy this logic with considerable discursive sophistication, constructing a problem landscape in which the Global South is systematically positioned as the primary victim of failures that are structurally implied, but never directly attributed, to the Western-led international order.

Figure 4 (GSI Problem Definition) operates through a notably different but structurally complementary logic. Where figure 3 constructs problems as economic and structural, the GSI frames global instability as simultaneously systemic, normative or behavioural.

In this sense, the attribution of responsibility becomes considerably more explicit. The "Four Deficits" are represented as growing, signalling systemic deterioration rather than conjunctural crisis: *"The Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism* are directly identified as behaviours that *contradict the spirit of the UN Charter and must be resisted and rejected*"—a formulation that stops short of naming the United States but whose referential target is unambiguous for any geopolitically literate audience. Most analytically significant is the GSI's treatment of sanctions and economic weaponization: *"abusing unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction does not solve a problem, but only creates more difficulties"; "avoid politicizing and weaponizing food security issues"*.

These formulations perform a precise discursive operation — what van Dijk (1998) identifies as the negative other-presentation of the outgroup through strategic implicature: the actor who abuses sanctions, who weaponizes food security, who pursues hegemonism is never named, but the construction of these practices as abuses, violations, and contradictions of the UN Charter constitutes a moral attribution of blame that the surface grammar renders deniable. The GSI thus achieves what the GDI's purely structural problem definition cannot: it assigns causal responsibility while maintaining the formal register of universalist principle.

Figure 5: GCI Problem Definition

Problem category	Quote
Intertwined Global Crises	<i>"In today's world, multiple challenges and crises are intertwined. The global economic recovery remains sluggish, the development gap is widening, ecological environment is deteriorating, and the Cold War mentality is lingering."</i>
Monopolised Modernisation	<i>""Modernization is not 'an exclusive patent' of a small handful of countries... It cannot be realized by a cookie cutter approach or simple 'copy and paste'."</i>
Developmental Suppression	<i>"...the practice of preserving one's own development privilege by suppressing and containing other countries' endeavour to achieve modernization."</i>
Weaponised Democracy	<i>"The practice of stoking division and confrontation in the name of democracy is in itself a violation of the spirit of democracy... What it brings is only endless harm."</i>

Hegemony and Power Politics	<i>"...China will neither tread the old path of colonization and plunder, nor the crooked path taken by some countries to seek hegemony once they grow strong. We firmly oppose hegemony and power politics in all their forms."</i>
Ideological Dogmatism	<i>"...refrain from imposing their own values or models on others and from stoking ideological confrontation."</i>

Figure 5 (GCI Problem Definition) represents the most direct and philosophically explicit of the three problem constructions, and the one in which the outgroup is most nearly named. This analysis has identified some patterns of behavioural attribution moving away from previous structural failures and normative violations. This is consistent with what Foucault (1972) identifies as a challenge to a regime of truth: the GCI targets not specific Western arguments but the normative hierarchy that makes those arguments appear authoritative in the first place (“monopolised modernisation”).

IV. Metaphors and analogies: “Community of Shared Future”, “Win-Win Cooperation” and the Vocabulary of Solidarity

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphors are not merely decorative elements in discourse, but rather cognitive structures through which humans understand abstract realities in terms of concrete ones. Thus, metaphors act as a mechanism for understanding and reasoning. The authors believed, however, that political and economic ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Metaphors allow us to expand our knowledge from the unknown to things we already know through relationships of similarity. China seeks to persuade audiences that its rise would be beneficial to all and frames it as the inevitable solution. Its interest, therefore, lies in shaping the interpretation of international law in favour of its strategic interests (Jorgensen, 2024).

Figure 6: GDI Metaphors and analogies

Metaphorical expression	Exact Quote
“The tide”	<i>“The tide of the new industrial revolution is gaining momentum”</i>
“Master key”	<i>“Development is the master key to all problems”</i>
“Community of life”	<i>“Human and nature form a community of life”</i>
“New engines”	<i>“... create new engines for post-COVID economic recovery...”</i>
“Immunity shield”	<i>“... and jointly build a strong global immunity shield”</i>
“Soft connectivity”	<i>“...enhance the 'soft connectibility' of policies, rules and standards...”</i>

The Global Development Initiative is rife with mechanical and organic metaphors, through which it seeks to depoliticise the concept of development and imbue it with a purely technical dimension governed by forces that exist independently of political dynamics. Metaphors such as *“the tide of the new industrial revolution”* frame transformation as an unstoppable and natural tide that countries must ride rather than steer.

Thus, the GDI employs absolute or essentialist metaphors such as *“Development is the eternal pursuit of human society”* and *“the master key to all problems”*. By elevating Development to an ontological or unquestionable category, it ensures that any criticism of this initiative or of Chinese economic governance is equated with a criticism of humanity’s very progress. In turn, certain geopolitical implications are identified through

these metaphors, such as “enhance the representation and voice of emerging markets”. This highlights how the world order is unfair, exclusive or under-represents these actors.

Figure 7: GSI Metaphors and Analogies

Metaphorical expression	Exact Quote
“Crossroads”	<i>“...the world is once again at a crossroads in history.”</i>
“Breeding ground”	<i>“...resolving conflicts through development and eliminating the breeding ground for insecurity.”</i>
“Organic whole”	<i>“These six commitments are... an organic whole of dialectical unity.”</i>
“Architecture”	<i>“There should be a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture...”</i>
“Passengers aboard the same ship”	<i>“Like passengers aboard the same ship, countries need to work in solidarity...”</i>
“Symptoms and root causes”	<i>“...prioritize political solutions, and take a holistic approach to address both symptoms and root causes.”</i>
“Torch of peace”	

	<i>"...so that the torch of peace will be passed on from generation to generation and shine across the world."</i>
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The use of metaphors in the GSI is evident. The document makes use of a significant number of words with positive connotations, presenting China as a responsible actor seeking to address global security issues. This portrays China’s active role as beneficial to all. Yi, Liu and Yang (2024) argue that behind this narrative lies China’s intention to project itself as a responsible actor that provides global public goods and stability.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, metaphors or abstract ideas make it possible to render acceptable complex political concepts that are difficult to communicate to the public. Thus, it refers to the world as a shared ship, the international community as a family, or security as an architecture. In this process of abstraction and simplification, the geopolitical interests underlying Chinese foreign policy are depoliticised, shifting the focus from its competition for power towards the collective management of problems. And finally, it makes room for classical Chinese concepts that evoke a vision of the international order in line with the Chinese perspective.

Figure 8: GCI Metaphors and Analogies

Metaphorical expression	Exact Quote
“Draining the pond to catch the fish”	<i>"Draining the pond to catch the fish or creating harmony between man and nature?"</i>
“Cookie cutter”	<i>"It cannot be realized by a cookie cutter approach or simple 'copy and paste'."</i>
“Garden where a hundred flowers bloom”	

	<i>"...jointly usher in a new prospect for humanity's modernization that is like a garden where a hundred flowers bloom." / "...make the garden of world civilizations colourful and vibrant."</i>
"Shackles"	<i>"...break the shackles of stale thinking..."</i>
"Blowing out others' lamp"	<i>"One will not be seen in a more favourable light after blowing out others' lamp; nor will they go farther by blocking others' paths."</i>
Making the pie bigger	<i>"...make the pie of humanity's modernization bigger..."</i>
"Long river of history"	<i>"...forge ahead nonstop in the long river of history!"</i>
"China's door"	<i>"China's door will only open wider."</i>

As aforementioned, the GCI entails a more philosophical perspective. It could be argued that this initiative fulfils two main aspects: one, presenting China as a responsible and moral actor; and second, a critique towards the Western institutional authority of its claimed universalism. In both patterns underlies a deeper strategic interest: the repositioning of China not only as an alternative pole of material power, but also as the legitimate custodian of a plural, post-hegemonic international order.

The most striking pattern is how the initiative contains natural or organic comparison: flowers blooming, rivers flowing through history, ponds sustaining ecosystems. In other words, it compares the geopolitical arena to natural processes, thereby framing China's vision not as a political strategy to be debated but as something inevitable and already happening. This naturalisation has been successfully achieved in terms of stabilising any ideological critique. Any dissidence towards this initiative can be seen against nature itself.

b) Meso Level: Regional Multilateralism and the Ideological Square in the Regional Context

I. The Belt and Road Initiative as a Narrative Vehicle: Institutional Framing in Regional Forums

Due to its growing economic presence in the region, China has been forced to increase its engagement with the Middle East. To secure diplomatic engagement within the region, China has established a series of organisations and institutional ties with regional bodies. In many of these bodies, China does not even hold membership, yet it is there that it seeks to shape its agenda and maximise its national interests. There is also a wide range of examples that demonstrate how Beijing deploys multilateral forums as institutional arenas where narrative coherence is produced and legitimised (Düzgit et al.,2025). In this context, these forums serve as privileged sites for the diffusion of peripheral diplomacy, a model based on non-interference, mutual benefit and South-South solidarity (Wang, 2014).

Homolar and Turner (2024) highlighted how the rhetorical coordination around geopolitical constructs is a precondition for any form of security cooperation, collective behaviour or even systems of international organisation. Hence, China has been expanding its influence within the region with the creation of diplomatic spaces such as China-Arab Summit or the Gulf Cooperation Summit. Through them, China promotes and formulates a shared understanding of the international environment, putting emphasis on taking mutually beneficial actions. Traditional western-oriented conditionalities such as ideology, norms and values play a limited role.

The China-Arab Summit is a summit of heads of state and government between China and the Arab League countries in 2022. Its significance lies in the process of institutionalisation that marked the transition from the previous China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), established in 2004, to this summit, which is underpinned by high-level diplomatic mechanisms. It was presented as an attempt to bring about the creation of a ‘China-Arab Community with a shared future’. The second, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is a regional organisation established in 1981 comprising six Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain). From the outset, it has pursued a policy of collective security as well as economic integration among the Gulf states. It is one of China’s most strategic partners

in terms of energy, capital and investment, and strategic connectivity for the BRI. Lastly, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional intergovernmental organisation established in 1967. It was founded to promote political and economic cooperation and regional stability. Since its inception, ASEAN has become one of China's most significant economic partners.

In this regard, China's Belt and Road Initiative acts as a driving force for institutional change in favour of globalisation. Its official aim is to improve connectivity between China and the rest of the world through infrastructure, trade and financial cooperation. This particular narrative encourages Middle Eastern states to participate and support this project that withhold values that are "shared and meaningful".

In terms of the narrative's plausibility, several aspects must be considered. Casas-Klett and Li (2022) highlighted how this proposal should be presented as an invitation to participate, rather than an imposition by a higher authority. Furthermore, the authors add, it must be consistent with its values and evolutionary principles, developing rules that effectively address any problems or inequalities. Finally, its success will depend on how its institutions and rules provide economic benefits for all parties involved (Casas-Klett & Li, 2022).

However, through its narrative, China presents development as the key solution to the region's instability. As Lons et al. (2019) noted, Beijing consistently frames Arab engagement through a vocabulary of "shared destiny", deliberately side-lining Western-liberal normative content. This section introduces the analytical framework applied to the official discourse produced at CASCFC and China-GCC summits, examining how BRI rhetoric naturalises China's role as a legitimate, benevolent stakeholder in the regional order.

II. Definition of Actors and Associated Adjectives: South-South Partners, Western Hegemons, and Regional Institutions

The Middle East and China have always shared a collective identity as victims of the West. That sense of a collective community, united against a common aggressor. But, as in the Global Initiatives, this division between aggressor and victim is not explicitly stated, but rather, once again, through the mention of legitimate actors and the omission of those actors whom it indirectly frames as aggressors.

In the discourse, both what is mentioned and what is not to be considered. The pattern repeats itself, with the emphasis on the positive attributes of the ingroup whilst implicitly determining the negative attributes of the outgroup. Figure 9 shows how China and the Arab world are constructed as this positive core, whilst the West is implied as the cause of structural instability. This is mentioned through a negative contrast: “solutions imposed from outside” (Cairo, 2016), the rejection of “spheres of influence” (Cairo, 2016) and the insistence on “independent foreign policy” or states “holding their future firmly in their own hands” (Riyadh, 2022), all of which presuppose the presence of an actor who imposes rather than negotiates. The discourse thus conceals a subtle and not immediately apparent ideological manoeuvre, which seeks to highlight Western inconsistency. This contributes to undermining the moral authority of Western actors. The effectiveness of these arguments does not depend solely on convincing Arab states of China’s appeal, but on making them feel less certain that the West is a trustworthy actor, thereby undermining the moral and political authority of the international order led by the West.

All of this reveals the coherence of the discourse across a decade of speeches. China constructs a binary cognitive map in which a positive ingroup — defined by sovereignty, partnership, historical solidarity, and peaceful development — is implicitly contrasted with a negative outgroup defined by imposition, hegemony, and interventionism. The sophistication of this strategy, from a van Dijkian perspective, lies in its cognitive economy: by never explicitly naming the outgroup, China avoids the rhetorical costs of direct confrontation while consistently activating the mental models that make the implied contrast legible to its audience. The Arab Middle East is not simply addressed as a geopolitical partner; it is discursively interpellated as a co-protagonist in a shared counter-hegemonic project — which is precisely the ideological work China's Global South narrative is designed to perform.

Figure 9: Actors throughout selected corpus

Actor	Quote	Source Speeches
	<i>"China persists in the path of peaceful development, pursues an independent foreign policy of peace" (Cairo 2016)</i> <i>"We do not seek proxies, do not seek spheres of influence, do not seek to fill a vacuum" (Cairo 2016)</i>	

China	<i>"China stands ready to work with the Arab side... committed to deepening reforms in all respects, continuing its fundamental policy of opening-up" (Beijing 2018)</i> <i>"China remains firm in pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace and upholding international fairness and justice" (Riyadh 2022)</i> <i>"China will work with the Arab side as good partners to make our relations a model for maintaining world peace and stability" (Beijing 2024)</i>	Cairo 2016; Beijing 2018; Riyadh 2022; Beijing 2024; KL 2025
Arab peoples/states	<i>"the Chinese and Arab peoples treat each other sincerely... This trust is unbreakable; money cannot buy it" (Cairo 2016)</i> <i>"Calling the Arab states China's natural partners in Belt and Road cooperation" (Beijing 2018)</i> <i>"As important players in the international political arena, China and Arab states should make concerted efforts" (Beijing 2018)</i> <i>"China supports Arab states in independently exploring development paths suited to their national conditions and holding their future firmly in their own hands" (Riyadh 2022)</i> <i>"both China and Arab states strive to accomplish their historical missions of national rejuvenation" (Beijing 2024)</i>	Cairo 2016; Beijing 2018; Riyadh 2022; Beijing 2024
Palestinian people	<i>"Safeguarding the legitimate national rights and interests of the Palestinian people is the league's sacred mission" (Cairo 2016)</i> <i>"The historical injustices done to the Palestinian people should not be left unattended indefinitely" (Riyadh 2022)</i> <i>"the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has escalated drastically, throwing the people into tremendous sufferings" (Beijing 2024)</i>	Cairo 2016; Riyadh 2022; Beijing 2024

Middle East	<i>"The Middle East is a land of abundance. What pains us is that this place has yet to escape war and conflict"</i> (Cairo 2016) <i>"the Middle East was confronted with severe challenges in peace and stability"</i> (Beijing 2018) <i>"The Middle East is undergoing new and profound changes. The aspiration of the Arab people for peace and development is much more compelling"</i> (Riyadh 2022) <i>"The Middle East is a land bestowed with broad prospects for development, but the war is still raging on it"</i> (Beijing 2024)	Cairo 2016; Beijing 2018; Riyadh 2022; Beijing 2024
International community	<i>"The international community should respect the will and role of the parties involved... rather than imposing solutions from outside"</i> (Cairo 2016) <i>"The international community should stay firm in its commitment to the two-state solution and the principle of 'land for peace'"</i> (Riyadh 2022)	Cairo 2016; Riyadh 2022
Developing countries	<i>"defend the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries... practice true multilateralism"</i> (Riyadh 2022)	Riyadh 2022
Arab League	<i>"The Arab League is a symbol of unity among Arab countries... its sacred mission"</i> (Cairo 2016)	Beijing 2018

III. Definition of the Problem and Causal Attribution: Colonial Legacy, Interventionism, and Structural Dependency as Attributed Causes

China has not merely described the current international political situation, but rather has framed it in such a way as to steer interpretation towards the country's strategic interests. It does this by establishing causal relationships: cause, effect and solution. In the corpus analysed, the most structurally significant move is China's reduction of Middle Eastern instability to a development deficit. The assertion that 'the root cause of Middle Eastern turmoil lies in development' (Cairo 2016) is not a descriptive claim but a discursive intervention of considerable ideological weight. By attributing regional conflict to underdevelopment, China achieves several things.

First, it depoliticises the diagnosis: development is consistently presented as a technocratic, universally beneficial process rather than a political project, which allows China to frame its economic engagement as humanitarian rather than strategic. Second, it naturalises China's proposed solution—the Belt and Road Initiative, technology transfer, etc.—as the logic and necessary steps towards stability and growth. Third, from a van Dijkian perspective, this framing implicitly attributes the region's underdevelopment to the existing global order. The cause is never stated explicitly, but the ideological frame makes it cognitively available. This same causal logic structures the treatment of terrorism and extremism, where China insists on 'addressing both symptoms and root causes' (Cairo 2016) and links radicalisation to developmental failure

According to Van Dijk, the framing of issues in political discourse is never a neutral act or a mere description of facts, but rather an ideological practice. Figure 10 demonstrates once again the consistency of China's discourse, constructing the concepts of development, power and multipolarity as the dominant frameworks.

The analytical value lies not so much in this definition of the problems—though that is part of it—but rather in the causal logic applied; which actors are implicitly responsible, or the solution proposed. All these elements are linked to China, its partnership and leadership.

Figure 10: Definition of the problem

Problem	Cause/ Quote	Proposed Solution Quote
Middle East instability and conflict	<i>"The root cause of Middle Eastern turmoil lies in development, and ultimately, the path forward depends on development" (Cairo 2016)</i>	<i>"To resolve differences, the key is to strengthen dialogue. Force is not the solution to problems; zero-sum thinking cannot bring lasting security" (Cairo 2016)</i>

Terrorism and extremism	<i>"No single policy can fully succeed on its own; counter-terrorism must persist in comprehensive measures, addressing both symptoms and root causes" (Cairo 2016)</i>	<i>"Development, de-radicalisation, cooperation; jointly oppose Islamophobia... reject association of terrorism with any particular ethnic group or religion" (Riyadh 2022)</i>
Palestinian question	<i>"The Palestinian issue is the root cause of peace in the Middle East... The international community must... uphold justice" (Cairo 2016) / "The historical injustices done to the Palestinian people should not be left unattended indefinitely" (Riyadh 2022)</i>	<i>"China firmly supports the establishment of an independent State of Palestine... based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital" (Cairo 2016; Riyadh 2022; Beijing 2024)</i>
Imposition of foreign development models	<i>"copying has no way out; imitation easily leads to confusion, but practice yields true knowledge. A country's development path can only be determined by its people" (Cairo 2016)</i>	<i>"China supports Arab states in independently exploring development paths suited to their national conditions" (Riyadh 2022)</i>
Arab economic underdevelopment	<i>Structural energy dependency; insufficient industrialisation and technology</i>	<i>"promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation... strengthen new sources of growth such as green and low-carbon development... aviation and aerospace, digital economy" (Riyadh 2022)</i>
	<i>"War should not continue indefinitely. Justice should not be absent forever. Commitment to the two-state solution"</i>	<i>"China will provide an additional RMB500 million yuan of assistance to help ease the humanitarian crisis"</i>

Gaza humanitarian crisis	<i>should not be wavered at will" (Beijing 2024)</i>	<i>in Gaza and support post-conflict reconstruction" (Beijing 2024)</i>
Global governance deficit	<i>"deficits in governance, trust, peace and development are getting wider" (Beijing 2024)</i>	<i>"jointly advocate for an equal and orderly multipolar world and a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization" (Beijing 2024)</i>
Clash of civilisations narrative	<i>"despite the clamour for 'clash of civilizations'... oppose discrimination against particular civilizations" (Riyadh 2022)</i>	<i>"advocate together inter-civilizational dialogue... endeavour to safeguard the diversity of world civilizations" (Riyadh 2022)</i>
Economic globalisation under threat	<i>"economic globalization is suffering heavy blows never seen before. The values we pursue all along... are severely challenged" (KL 2025)</i>	<i>"we must firmly uphold the WTO-centered multilateral trading system, and stand for a stable and orderly global market environment" (KL 2025)</i>
Supply-chain disruption and decoupling	<i>"Amid more decoupling practice, supply-chain disruptions and trade barriers" (KL 2025)</i>	<i>"keep sharing resources and empowering one another... safeguard the stable and unimpeded industrial and supply chains" (KL 2025)</i>

IV. Metaphors and Analogies

As aforementioned, metaphors are not simple decorative ornaments in political language: they serve as cognitive structures that organise abstract realities and events. It provides an enriched tool to naturalise ideological representations. Figure 11 reveals that China's metaphorical repertoire is never accidental nor merely rhetorical, it cognitively frames this China-Arab relationship within an ideological structure and delegitimises the existing global order.

Several metaphorical resources can be identified in this corpus. The most striking element is the Silk Road, invoked throughout these forums, and elaborated through associated images such as the “earliest camel caravan from China” and the “Silk Road spirit passed from generation to generation”. By anchoring the Belt and Road Initiative in a pre-colonial or pre-Western historical relationship, China constructs its economic and political engagement and attractiveness. In other words, these resources draw on a shared identity and experience on both sides, which transcends the constraints of time to become something that spans generations.

Furthermore, the use of Arabic proverbs or poetic references stands out: ‘your own nails will prick you’ or ‘friends are the sunshine of life’. This metaphorical usage is not accidental, but rather reflects China’s attempt to present itself as an internal actor rather than an external power seeking to project its national interests. In short, China seeks to avoid presenting itself as an imposing force, positioning itself instead as a guarantor of the public good, stability and horizontal agreements.

Figure 11: Metaphors and analogies

Metaphorical expression	Source Speeches
<i>Your own nails are itchy</i> (Arab proverb)	Cairo, 2016
<i>Camel race</i>	Cairo, 2016
<i>Pyramid more eternal than time</i>	Cairo, 2016
<i>Tree of friendship</i>	Cairo, 2016
<i>Rejuvenation of two young nations</i>	Beijing 2018; Riyadh 2022
<i>Community with a shared future</i>	All speeches
<i>Door wide open</i>	Beijing 2018; KL 2025
<i>Scaling new heights / Leapfrog growth</i>	Beijing, 2024
<i>Silk Road spirit passed on from generation to generation</i>	Beijing 2024; Riyadh 2022
<i>Friends are the sunshine in life</i> (Arab saying)	Beijing 2024
<i>Clamour for clash of civilizations</i>	Riyadh 2022
<i>Brave wind and storms together</i>	Riyadh 2022
<i>The Chinese economy is an ocean, not a pond</i>	KL, 2025

<i>Each storm only deepens resilience</i>	KL 2025
<i>Boundless like the oceans</i>	KL 2025
<i>War continues to burn on this land</i>	Beijing 2024
<i>Ballast of cooperation</i>	Beijing 2024

V. Conclusion

The academic world is currently debating the changes that the multipolar world will bring. Power dynamics—and with them, the official narratives of national actors—are shifting towards a new logic. Rather than opting for direct confrontation, China is choosing a cautious revisionism and a somewhat silent critique of the international order.

The international order is being challenged, both from outside and from within. In this context, understanding how actors such as China capitalise on this erosion through discourse is essential to grasping the direction in which is heading. Power appears to be taking on new dimensions, no longer merely material, but also normative. China is managing to win over the Global South without waging a single war: simply by reframing the meaning of concepts such as sovereignty or development. This makes it necessary to treat discursive power as a particularly valuable analytical category.

On the other hand, the Middle East is a region that the West has treated for decades from a position of moral superiority (democracy, human rights, conditionality) and which, above all, has been the victim of the so-called Western double-standards. In this sense, China has not had to manufacture this resentment; it has to introduce it into the discourse strategically. All this leads to the conclusion that this research has not only analysed Chinese policy but also addresses the question of legitimacy and how it is constructed discursively. Legitimacy, after all, is the mechanism by which international orders are constructed or destroyed.

The analysis has sought to demonstrate how China strategically deploys the discourse of the Global South to construct itself as a normatively alternative to the Western liberal order in the Middle East. States' foreign policy actions also respond to a prior shift in narrative. Any action, whether legal or illegal under international law, must be justified or legitimised in the eyes of the international community.

Following a detailed analysis of the selected corpus, it can be concluded that this deployment constitutes a coherent, sophisticated, and sustained discursive strategy whose primary function is not only the articulation of an ideological alternative, but the gradual erosion of the moral foundations upon which Western hegemony has rested.

Hypothesis 1: The solidarity frame and binary opposition

The first hypothesis—that China systematically employs a solidarity frame constructing opposition between an interventionist West vs a cooperative, development-oriented Global South—has been confirmed with considerable analytical precision. Across the selected corpus, the analysis has identified a structurally consistent pattern of what van Dijk (1998) terms the Ideological Square. On the one hand, it has successfully cultivated a positive self-image of China and the Global South, associating them with cooperation, development and peace. This stands in contrast to a West portrayed—through omission or implication—as interventionist, hegemonic and abusive in its use of sanctions or economic instruments. Through its discourse, the Communist Party guides this cognitive process via strategic implicature rather than direct attribution. The success of its narrative lies in the construction of a binary opposition that is not between China and the West, but between the Global South and the hegemonic order.

This binary framing through omission allows for the establishment of a causal link between the underdevelopment of the Global South and an international system whose structural pillars favour rich, developed or Western countries at the expense of the poverty of peripheral nations. China denounces “*the Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemony*” as inconsistent with the UN Charter. This confrontation allows it to present itself as part of that ‘*we*’ that constantly denounces the epistemic foundations upon which policies claim legitimacy and frame democratic universalism as civilizational imperialism.

By declining to name its adversary, China maintains the formal register of universalist principle while consistently activating the mental models that make the implied contrast legible to a geopolitically literate audience. The negative other-presentation operates through structural contrast rather than direct assertion, making it simultaneously more effective and more deniable.

Hypothesis 2: Moral erosion over ideological substitution

The second hypothesis—that the primary function of China’s Global South narrative is not to propose a coherent ideological alternative, but to erode the moral authority of Western institution—has been confirmed, but requires important qualification.

This hypothesis sought to answer the question of whether China can position itself as a major power whilst still qualifying as a developing country. This is possible for several reasons. Firstly, China has framed development in both historical and technical terms. By evoking its own trauma, it invokes the ‘century of humiliation’ as a narrative of victimisation that remains relevant, even in the face of subsequent economic development. Not only that, but it allows China to extol its own capabilities and bolster national and international confidence. This, in turn, enables it to attack the West’s dark past—*tu quoque*—by referencing colonialism and imperialist aggression, something the countries of the Middle East have experienced. This gives China an advantage in bolstering domestic nationalism and responding to global geopolitical needs. In short, it spreads the message that China has the capability, but not the hegemonic ambition, unlike the West.

Furthermore, the strategic use of the term ‘developing’ in multilateral forums grants China preferential treatment and fewer demands. When China speaks of the Global South, it never speaks solely of itself, but presents itself as ‘the voice of the voiceless’. This allows it to position itself as a power seeking a solution for the global community in distress, setting aside its own interests. The problems definitions identified across the macro and meso levels reveal how the Western-led international order as causally responsible, while China is positioned as the remedy.

Moral erosion contributes to its ability to maintain incompatible identities, provided that its counterparts—Arab, African or Southeast Asian states—do not perceive it as a threat comparable to that posed by the West. In other words, the aim is not to convince Middle Eastern states why the Chinese model is desirable, but rather to cast doubt on the impartiality and moral legitimacy of the West.

Hypothesis 3: Normative Substitution and vocabulary of the liberal order

The third hypothesis — that China fosters a gradual reconfiguration of the normative consensus through the appropriation and redefinition of liberal vocabulary, displacing

Western frameworks without openly rejecting them — is the most analytically ambitious of the three, and the one for which the evidence, while present, is most diffuse across the corpus. This research has identified clear patterns of normative substitution at the lexical level: concepts such as sovereignty, multilateralism, development, peace, and shared future are consistently invoked across all three global initiatives and across the meso-level speeches, but their normative content is systematically redefined in ways that decouple them from their liberal governance associations.

A pattern has been identified whereby liberal vocabulary is being weaponised against its original proponents. China is blurring the lines between international law and its principles of ‘peaceful coexistence’ in order to undermine the Western conception of international law in pursuit of its strategic interests. The result is a normative architecture that speaks the language of the liberal order while encoding a fundamentally different set of political assumptions — what this research has termed normative substitution: the replacement of the content of shared concepts without the confrontational rejection of the vocabulary itself.

However, to confirm this hypothesis would be to disregard the limitations of the corpus used in this study.

Limitations and avenues for future research

The role of any analyst is not only to defend their positions, but also to be aware of the limitations of their research. The most significant limitation has been the absence of a micro-level analysis designed to complement the macro- and meso-levels of the selected corpus. Originally, the research design also envisioned a micro level of analysis, focused on China’s bilateral diplomatic statements during its mediation of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, in order to examine how Beijing’s role as a mediator was discursively constructed and operationalised as a vehicle of normative influence. Due to constraints of time and space, this level could not be incorporated into the final analysis, though it remains a particularly promising avenue for future research. This would have deepened the analysis in specific countries of the region.

A second limitation concerns the scope of the corpus, which is confined to Chinese-produced discourse. The analysis consequently captures the production of China’s Global South narrative but cannot assess its reception: how these narratives are processed, accepted, resisted, or reinterpreted by the Arab states they address. A reception-focused

analysis, drawing on Arab diplomatic responses, media coverage, and parliamentary debate, would be necessary to assess the actual ideological impact of China's discursive strategy.

Finally, the decision to prioritise van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, while analytically justified by the research objectives, has meant that the frameworks of Wodak and van Leeuwen have been applied less systematically than their theoretical exposition suggested. Future research could productively operationalise van Leeuwen's representational categories — particularly the distinction between activation and passivation — to examine how China constructs Arab states as autonomous agents rather than passive recipients of its development model, and Wodak's five discursive strategies to trace how nomination and predication operate at the level of diplomatic protocol.

Broader implications: Discourse as an instrument of order building

This study has sought to understand how the competition for global order is, ultimately, a competition over narrative. In words of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) “the struggle for power is, among other things, a struggle over which vision of the world will predominate”. China's engagement with the Middle East cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of energy interests, infrastructure investment, or diplomatic mediation. Beijing's strategy is accompanied by a bid for normative authority, that is, the capacity to define what counts as legitimate international conduct, which principles organise behaviour or the ability to shape how regional actors interpret their place in a changing world.

Mistrust of the Western model is already having an impact on the dynamics of power. Values such as democracy, human rights and diplomacy itself are increasingly perceived as a weakness amongst states that operate according to the logic of the strongest. This results in the emergence of a system of competitive normative pluralism, where concepts such as the rule of law and sovereignty lose their universal character and become the subject of dispute amongst rival interpretative frameworks. The absence of a universal authority and the perception of international law as a selective tool of the powerful will, in effect, bring new challenges to the international system as we have known it until now.

This tension brings a fundamental dilemma to the centre of international debate: Can a truly multipolar order with normative stability exist?

VI. References

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