



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Deciphering the Global
Development Initiative:
China's New Pathway for
Global South?*

REPORT

Speakers:

Samantha Custer

Anthea Mulakala

Linda Calabrese

20 September 2023

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Speakers: **Samantha Custer**, Director of Policy Analysis, AidData, Williams & Mary Global Research Institute, Virginia, USA.

Anthea Mulakala, Senior Director, International Development Cooperation, The Asia Foundation, New Delhi.

Linda Calabrese, Senior Research Fellow, International Economic Development Group, Overseas Development Institute, UK.

Chair: **Dr. Anand P. Krishnan**, Fellow, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR.

Date: 20 September 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The seminar commenced with the Chair, Dr. Anand P. Krishnan, introducing the topic of the seminar briefly, including the details of China's Global Development Initiative (GDI), the rapid rise in its popularity as also how it was a consolidation of previous initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative. The seminar was structured into three rounds, beginning with a general discussion by all the speakers on their understanding of the GDI and its relevance. In the next round the speakers made an assessment of the regional context, followed by the final Q&A round.

Ms. Anthea Mulakala initiated the discussion, by offering a conceptual framework to understand non-Western development cooperation initiatives. She further elaborated on the Global South being a contested space for such initiatives with the rise of China's influence in the Indo-Pacific and subsequent strategies to counter this very rise. She argued that with the aim of countering Western hegemonic narratives on development, China was diversifying regionally, bilaterally as well as multilaterally. In this effort, she listed out the GDI's key priorities and principles namely, poverty reduction, security, COVID-19 vaccines, development financing, climate change and green development, industrialisation, digital economy and connectivity. She also posited that the GDI may increase the geopolitical

tensions between China and the US in the Southeast Asian region, as the regional member countries unanimously support the GDI in the hope that it would address their development challenges. As a state-centred development initiative, the GDI stands in contrast with the US's security-centred approach in the Indo-Pacific region.

Ms. Linda Calabrese's analysis affirmed that of Ms. Mulakala, by elaborating on inclusive growth strategies, and stressing on the role of security as the "bedrock" of development. She argued that the primary aim of the initiative was to bridge the divide between the Global South and the Global North, and emphasised on how this initiative differed from the BRI, primarily through the shift from bilateralism to multilateralism.

The first round concluded with Ms. Samantha Custer's analysis of the GDI, highlighting two main motivations for China – geostrategic, which aimed at bolstering China's reputation as a global leader; and humanitarian, which leaned towards providing an alternative to the existing development architecture.

The second round commenced with Ms. Mulakala's special focus on the Southeast Asia, and her elaboration on the reasons for a strong regional support for the initiative. She presented the GDI as a more lucrative development-centric alternative to the American security-centric approach, particularly for the ruling elites in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. She further elaborated on the region being a strategically contested space for Great Powers as well as other rising Powers such as Japan and China, and the impact of the GDI on such competition. She concluded by emphasising that while the BRI and GDI were parallel initiatives, the specificities varied greatly.

Next, Ms. Calabrese focused on the positive reactions by African nations to the GDI. She argued that though the aid and developmental projects under GDI have not materialised on ground, there has not been any criticism in general. Interestingly, she posited that infrastructure projects in some African nations like Kenya have seen a backlash from the local population, as development projects compromised security. She further questioned the positive impact of such initiatives on the local population and their mixed responses.

Finally, Ms. Custer asserted that GDI is not a replacement for BRI; both projects solve fundamentally different problems. GDI is much more about reputation-building and norm-shaping on a global stage. Moreover, GDI has been augmented by China's experiences in implementing BRI projects, where the emphasis is on lower-risk projects involving lesser complexity and faster delivery. She highlighted another shift in China's approach where it is ready to work with existing multilateral institutions, which was not the case under BRI projects. While BRI projects were more driven by China-based economic and infrastructure development projects, GDI is more in tandem with multilateral institutions like the UN such that it augments the existing objectives for the global south.

Following the presentations of all three speakers, the Chair remarked on how the GDI was receiving mixed responses from different countries, and raised some issues regarding the validity of the initiative. Thought-provoking questions were raised by the participants in the following interactive session, including questions regarding sources of funding for GDI and how financing GDI projects differed from BRI loans, which the three speakers duly addressed.

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