



By: Ana Palacio

# New Chinese security vision and American retreat from global leadership



It is indisputable at this point that the United States is disengaging from global leadership.

While America's retreat has so far been largely a choice – spearheaded by President Donald Trump's "America First" administration – it may well become irreversible.

And if the Communist Party of China (CPC) has its way, the People's Republic will emerge as the new global hegemon.

China's recently **published** white paper on national security, its first ever, offers a glimpse into the CPC's plans.

Reflecting President Xi Jinping's "holistic national security concept," the document articulates an expansive, integrated approach, encompassing political, economic, military, technological, cultural, and societal domains.

And unlike **previous** defense-focused white papers, it establishes political security – specifically, the CPC's leadership – as the foundation of national stability, essential to enable China to act as a stabilizing force in a turbulent world.

That turbulence, China asserts, can be blamed largely on Western powers – especially the US – which have fostered disorder through containment and interference.

China has a point here: even America's current withdrawal from global leadership has been conflicted and chaotic.

That chaos begins with the Trump administration's embrace of economic nationalism and continues through Trump's rejection of decades of US foreign-policy principles.

Trump's willingness to leverage American power to shape global affairs according to his whims is another incitement to instability, with his unilateral decision to bomb Iranian nuclear sites being the most obvious **example**.

## Accusations of arrogance and

## hypocrisy

To be sure, in the Trump administration's view, the US **operation** in Iran was a bold, one-off maneuver aimed squarely at ending the Iranian nuclear threat and advancing peace in the Middle East.

It was thus perfectly aligned with the administration's **commitment** not to become embroiled in new "forever wars."

But not only is the operation unlikely to have **achieved** its objectives; it undermines US soft power by inviting accusations of arrogance and hypocrisy.

**The Trump administration has scaled back cultural diplomacy and slashed development aid – hallmarks of America's post-Cold War influence**

This appears to matter little to the Trump administration, which seems convinced that national security depends not on global outreach, but on military deterrence, advances in cybersecurity, and economic protectionism, exemplified by high tariffs, efforts to secure critical-mineral supply chains, and limits on the export of advanced technology to China.

In fact, the Trump administration has scaled back cultural diplomacy and **slashed** development aid – hallmarks of America's post-Cold War influence.

## China positions itself as a stable and certain actor

This has provided a critical opening for China to position itself as a stable and certain actor in regional and global affairs, a champion of multilateralism, an investor in and defender of the Global South, and a just peacemaker.

Within Asia, this vision has materialized in "treaties of good-neighborliness and friendly

cooperation” between China and nine countries, and in China’s promotion of greater regional security cooperation, **including** with the ASEAN countries.

More broadly, China is touting Xi’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), which was **launched** in 2022 as an alternative to Western-led security frameworks that can support broad-based, “win-win” cooperation on “complex and intertwined security challenges.”

### China is further nurturing its soft power through cultural outreach

The message has resonated widely: according to China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more than 120 countries have endorsed the GSI.

China is further nurturing its soft power through cultural outreach – from its network of Confucius Institutes to its recent dialogues with the African Union – and economic engagement, including trade, lending, and investment.

In May, the country **introduced** a \$9 billion credit line for Latin America and the Caribbean. More broadly, China has been allocating huge amounts of funding for infrastructure and energy projects across the Global South, including through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The GSI, the BRI, and other projects form the pillars of what China calls a “global community of shared future.”

## Very different ideas

But, like the US, China’s claim to the moral high ground is not always aligned with reality.

Its message is clear: China, with the CPC at its helm, is the just, stable, non-hegemonic power the world – especially the Global South – needs.



*If the US wants to remain a decisive player in the emerging multipolar world order, it will need to reaffirm the postwar foreign-policy principles that underpinned the rules-based order – Mark Rutte with Donald Trump*

But its rhetoric of justice and multilateralism is belied by its coercive domestic policies and aggressive regional maneuvers, such as the militarization of the South China Sea.

In fact, while China presents its security posture as entirely defensive – aimed only at ensuring its own sovereignty – it has been pursuing various territorial claims with increasing assertiveness.

Regarding Taiwan, the CPC makes “no promise to renounce the use of force” and “reserves the option of taking all necessary measures” to “reunite” China.

Following through on these threats would be far less justifiable than the US operation in Iran, which was at least aimed at neutralizing a perceived threat.

Taiwan poses no threat whatsoever to China or its neighbors. But for many countries in the Global South, America’s history of double standards, including its inconsistent human-rights advocacy, has so decimated its moral authority that its interventions stand out as uniquely problematic, especially as it turns its back on soft power.

The US and China have very different ideas of what it means to underwrite global stability. For the US, the objective – at least before Trump’s presidency – had been to quash or deter threats to a rules-based order, including through selective interventions.

But as Trump's America abandons that approach and alienates more of the world, China's vision, focused on fortifying CPC control and building alternative frameworks for global engagement, has gained greater appeal.

If the US wants to remain a decisive player in the emerging multipolar world order, it will need to reaffirm the postwar foreign-policy principles that underpinned the rules-based order that it helped build but now threatens.

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