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China “Global Civilization” initiative and Central Asia

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Regarding today's agenda, it is worth noting that the "Global Civilization Initiative" (GCI) was initiated by the Chinese side earlier this year, but since then, there have been few events dedicated to this topic. Expert circles have attempted to analyze China's goals and the potential consequences for foreign states. However, many questions remain "open" regarding the regional implications of this initiative. The author had the opportunity to engage in discussions with scholars from around the world at the Shanghai Forum on China Studies (November 24, 2023), where they share their opinions on the new Chinese idea GCI.

Introduction

With the rise of Xi Jinping to power, the Chinese leadership has placed a new task on the agenda – "Transforming China into the world's leading country" under the slogan "Da fuxing de Zhongguo meng" (The great rejuvenation of China), which is now known as the "Chinese Dream."¹ Overall, by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049, achieving these goals should turn China into the world's first developed state, and practical steps are being taken to create all necessary conditions. Against the backdrop of global uncertainty, China attaches greater importance to promoting new initiatives and discourses that will primarily advance a "China-centric view" of global development, enhancing China's international political role.

Prominent American scholar Samuel Huntington predicted in his book "The Clash of Civilizations" that rivalries between different civilizations could occur in the near future. Today, elements of Huntington's prediction can be observed as leading world powers shift their rivalries to the civilizational level, seeking to demonstrate the significance of their civilizations in global development. Western countries, in particular, actively defend and propagate a Western-centric civilizational order, while Russian President V.Putin, speaking about the civilizational significance of Russia at the Valdai Forum, characterized it as an original civilisation-state². In response to these aspirations of the leading global powers, China has also promoted its own initiative, the "Global Civilization Initiative."³

¹ Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary. July 1, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary> (access 18.10.2023)

² Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 20th Annual Meeting. 05.10.2023. <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club-transcript-2023/> (access 21.10.23)

³ Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting. Xinhua, March 16, 2023. http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/16/content_85171478.htm. (access 14.10.23)

These steps by the leading global powers raise concerns within the international community, particularly among the academic community. S.Huntington, in his famous book, pointed out the danger of a clash of civilizations as the most serious aspect of superpower competition.

Understanding China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)

The Global Civilization Initiative was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 15, 2023, during a high-level dialogue of the Communist Party of China with global political parties⁴.

The goal of the initiative is to create a global network of inter-civilizational dialogue and cooperation, enrich the content of exchanges, and expand avenues of cooperation between the peoples of all countries to foster mutual understanding, friendship, and joint progress.

Within this initiative, the key areas are:

- 1) Respect for the diversity of civilization;
- 2) Advocating the common values of humanity;
- 3) Highly valuing the inheritance and innovation of Civilizations;
- 4) Joint advocacy for robust international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.

According to Xi Jinping, civilizations should not clash, and no civilization reigns supreme. Civilizations differ from one another, much like people differ in skin color and the language they speak. In implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, we must ensure that when it comes to different civilizations, exchange replaces alienation, mutual learning replaces conflicts, and coexistence replaces a sense of superiority. This will strengthen mutual understanding, respect, and trust among different countries⁵.

Participants and experts at the Shanghai Forum expressed a range of interesting opinions regarding the new Chinese initiative. Chinese scholars, for instance, note that the Global Civilization Initiative has contributed to a shift away from a Western-centric worldview in developing countries and has demonstrated the presence of alternative possibilities. Through this initiative, China has been able to make countries more receptive to its policies. However, cultural differences have emerged as one of the main obstacles to the realization of this initiative. Taking this issue into account, the Chinese leader presented the Global Civilization Initiative in 2023. According to their opinions, the GCI is not a program or strategy but rather a Chinese vision for

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Xi Jinping: the chief architect of the Belt and Road Initiative. Xinhua. 2023-10-17. <https://english.news.cn/20231017/61dcf8ddfd7c4f1abb03a205376867b1/c.html> (access 25.10.2023)

bringing different peoples closer together and establishing close interactions with China.

Some experts argue that within a single civilization, there can exist various ethnic groups that share similar ancestral and civilizational traits. This approach implies the coexistence of multiple civilizations⁶. In this regard, one of the possible motivations for the launch of the GCI was the Chinese leaders' desire to strengthen China's civilizational significance on a global scale, pursuing the common interests and peaceful nature of China's global politics.

Some scholars view this idea as an attempt by Beijing to create a concept of "Xivilization" - a vision of the world through the prism of Xi Jinping⁷. China's recent "diplomatic success" based on this concept, such as mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, suggests that the Chinese leader intends to create a forum where China acts as a mediator, resolving the most acute problems between different "civilizations."

Furthermore, China intends to send several important signals to the world. First and foremost, China sees itself as the cultural, political, and economic center of the world. This "China-centric" worldview has greatly shaped China's views on global governance - the rules, norms, and institutions that regulate international cooperation. The China-centric model of world order has been the conceptual basis for China's global ambitions, regardless of the period in its history. China has largely moved away from its cautious strategy of previous years. Today, Beijing seeks to create alternative international structures that take into account China's interests and serve the goal of establishing a China-centric world⁸.

By launching the GCI, China aims to enhance its role in global politics and establish itself as the leading global civilization. It seeks to serve as an example for others. In moral terms, China attempts to promote its own system of values, largely based on its rich heritage of traditional culture, which is adapted to contemporary conditions.

Director of the Center for East Asian and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Studies at MGIMO University A.Lukin believes that the new civilizational ideology reflects the Chinese leadership's growing pride and self-confidence due to the country's tremendous economic success. This is a new step in the movement away from the modest foreign policy of Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese leadership is telling the world (or rather, itself) that China has

⁶ Тимофеев И. Государство-цивилизация и политическая теория. 18 мая 2023. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/gosudarstvo-tsivilizatsiya-i-politicheskaya-teoriya/>

⁷ Ryan Ho Kilpatrick (2023). China's "Xivilizing" mission. China Media Project <https://chinamediaproject.org/2023/05/04/chinas-xivilizing-mission/> (access 25.11.2023)

⁸ Еще один +С5? (о механизме регулярных встреч министров иностранных дел «Китай+Центральная Азия»). 23.07.2020. CAA NETWORK, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/20237>. (access 22.10.2023)

nothing more to learn from others; on the contrary, others should learn something from China⁹.

The expert also points out that unlike the United States or the Soviet Union, China does not yet impose its political or economic model on others. However, the main idea is that China has shown the world a new path to modernization that differs from the Western model¹⁰.

However, this initiative has been met with considerable criticism in the West, where the GCI is perceived as another PR campaign by the Chinese leadership primarily targeting the audience in Global South countries, which is a key focus of Chinese policy. Many Western experts, when assessing the idea of the GCI, consider it an impractical project with a very general set of ideas and wishes. It is merely an attempt by Beijing to enhance its global influence by increasing its foreign policy attractiveness. For instance, Robert Daly, the Director of the Wilson Center's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, regards the Chinese global initiatives as overly broad and vague. According to him, the initiative is not a "concept" but just a phrase. All that China offers are phrases that no one can object to. However, even if it is currently vague, they will gradually add more substance to it after approval¹¹.

GCI and Central Asia

According to S. Huntington's theory, the recognition of civilizations largely depends on the power of the initiating country, including economic, political, and military power. If these forms of power remain at the same level or start to decline, the attractiveness and desire to emulate such civilizations will decrease. However, the key factor is the longevity of the ideology or elements of civilization and how long they maintain their characteristics in society. This also depends on the similarity of goals and traditions among local populations and their willingness to embrace these values¹².

The growing influence of China in Central Asia has gained more momentum against the backdrop of major geopolitical changes in the region and the world as a whole, such as the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the events in Kazakhstan in January, Russia's special operation in

⁹ Lukin A. (2021). Has Communist China Created a New Civilization? The National Interest. December 18, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-communist-china-created-new-civilization-198037?page=0%2C1>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Muratalieva N. (2023). Central Asia in the Context of US-China Confrontation. An Interview with Robert Daly. <https://cabar.asia/en/central-asia-in-the-context-of-us-china-confrontation-an-interview-with-robert-daly>. (access 15.09.23)

¹² Хантингтон С. (2003). Столкновение цивилизаций /С. Хантингтон; Пер. с англ. Т.Велимеева, Ю.Новикова. -М.: «Издательство АСТ».

Ukraine, and so on. All of this compels Beijing to review its Central Asian policy and make appropriate adjustments, to which the countries in the region should pay special attention. A significant step taken by China to strengthen its position in Central Asia was the institutionalization of relations between China and the Central Asian states following the first summit in Xi'an, China, on May 17, 2023.

In recent years, concern has been expressed among the population of Central Asian countries regarding China's growing influence in the region, while at the governmental level, a warm and respectful tone continues to dominate. Chinese experts acknowledge that China has a relatively unfavorable national image in the region, despite its expanding presence there¹³. This perception is explained by a combination of historical factors, such as anti-Chinese propaganda during Soviet times, the growth of Chinese economic presence in the region, increasing debt obligations, and the rising number of Chinese immigrants in Central Asia. Scholars also believe that the lack of cultural proximity and a lack of understanding of each other's values are factors that hinder a positive perception of China in the region.

In the past few years, Beijing has taken several measures to strengthen its cultural and humanitarian presence in Central Asia, seizing the opportunity to discuss regional processes without Russia's involvement. Confucius Institutes have been established in each Central Asian country, offering Chinese language courses. Significant government grants have been allocated for students to study in Chinese universities, and since 2023, "Lu Ban Workshops" (training centers for specific professions) have been opened. Chinese technologies have firmly established themselves in Central Asia, and Chinese media attempts to create a positive image. These steps reflect China's desire to be better understood beyond the formal sphere of intergovernmental relations, that is, within local societies.

Over the past decade, China-Central Asia relations have gained momentum due to the involvement of Central Asian countries in the Belt and Road Initiative. China is gradually developing new concepts of security, economic, and cultural development. It sees Central Asia as a crossroads of political, economic, and cultural connections between the West and the East. Central Asia is likely to become a key focus of the new Global Civilization Initiative.

Despite the shared directions of the GCI, its main concept has not yet been fully developed. Considering the Chinese approach, this project is still in

¹³ Huasheng Z. (2015). Image Creation: How China Can Gain a Foothold in Central Asia. *Journal of International Analytics*. (4):80-95. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2015-0-4-80-95>.

the process of refinement and the exploration of ideas. Considering this, it can be assumed that not all regional countries have fully grasped the essence of the new Chinese initiative. For example, at the first China-CA summit in May 2023, only Kazakhstan expressed support for this initiative, while other heads of state did not mention it in their speeches. Later, during a visit to China (23-25 January 2024), President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev officially expressed support for new Chinese initiative. However, leaders of other countries have not yet stated their official positions, although they will eventually express their support. On the other hand, this could also be seen as a manifestation of the cautious stance of the regional countries regarding Xi Jinping's new initiative. Until specific goals, objectives, and a general concept are announced, the regional countries will continue to analyze and study this initiative.

As expected, the inclusion of Central Asia in the Global Civilization Initiative is part of China's broader strategy to increase its economic, political, and cultural influence in the region and beyond.

However, when analyzing the relations between China and the Central Asian states, experts highlight the presence of significant "civilizational barriers," such as differences in mentality, culture, traditions, and language, which prevent the assimilation of the two cultures. Therefore, it is emphasized that the full implementation of China's new initiative in Central Asia will not be easy. According to S. Huntington's theory, cooperation is based on trust, which is usually built on shared values and culture. Islamic and Chinese civilizations differ in religious, cultural, social, traditional, political, and fundamental ways of life¹⁴. Hence, these differences raise important questions that can significantly impact the successful implementation of the Global Civilization Initiative in Central Asia. Despite all the announced opportunities by China or, as referred to in the West, the risks of the Global Civilization Initiative, neighboring countries find it crucial to study the experience of the People's Republic of China.

Conclusion

In general, Beijing's active promotion of the "Global Civilization Initiative" is currently just an idea, and its acceptance and perception by different countries and peoples of the world depend on how well this idea aligns with their civilizational interests. The GCI is a new proposal from Beijing that will be further developed and enriched with new content, taking

¹⁴ Хантингтон С. Столкновение цивилизаций /С. Хантингтон; Пер. с англ. Т.Велимеева, Ю.Новикова. -М.: «Издательство АСТ», 2003. -С.285.

into account both the official positions of states and the suggestions of scholars from around the world. However, history shows that there is no universal civilization that caters to the interests of all peoples and countries of the world. Despite skeptical views, the GCI deserves closer attention as it serves as an important indicator of what the Chinese leadership wants, as well as what it does not want to see in global politics. As a diplomatic platform, this new mechanism may be in demand, especially in the current context of confrontation between states. Each region, considering the initiatives put forward by Beijing, can expect certain results and choose its own path of development.

Regarding the GCI, Central Asian countries have not yet reached a common understanding of the initiative. However, annual bilateral meetings between Central Asian and Chinese leaders, including the "C5+China" format, can be an important step toward forming a shared regional position on China's new initiative.