ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative

China's new worldview eschews triumphalism in favour of a more cautious external posture

On April 21, at the annual Boao Forum for Asia, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward a new Global Security Initiative (GSI). This is the political counterpart to the earlier Global Development Initiative (GDI) he had announced at the UN on September 21, 2021. The GSI followed the Ukraine crisis while the GDI was presented as a response to the global economic crisis in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both initiatives have in turn been linked to Mr Xi's signature slogan of fostering a "community of shared future of mankind".

In both speeches this idea of a common destiny of mankind is reinforced by Mr Xi, depicting mankind as being on the same boat, "a giant ship on which our shared destiny hinges." Who could disagree? These are all ideas couched in high rhetoric with few details. The language is broad and unexceptionable and countries find it hard to oppose them.

SHYAM SARAN

The GDI has been endorsed by over 100 countries and several UN development agencies. This is similar to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) being approvingly incorporated earlier in various international documents. China refers to these semantic triumphs as proof of the international acceptability and legitimacy of those ideas. This is what China calls the exercise of "discourse power." These concepts are subsequently packed with various specific interpretations that are aligned with Chinese political and economic objectives. It is then projected that those who may have innocently signed on to noble declarations of ambiguous intent also support these more parochial Chinese interests. It is, therefore, worthwhile to look at subsequent elaborations by authoritative Chinese spokespersons to gauge what China's real concerns may be and what policy actions are being signalled.

China was greatly concerned about the negative publicity it was receiving as a country of origin of the Covid-19 pandemic, which it had tried to cover up in the initial stages. One element in countering this negative image was to focus attention on China's contribution to global economic recovery and its support to developing economies through aid and infrastructure investment such as through the BRI. Chinese development cooperation was specifically linked to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and in this context, China as a development model for developing countries was always included. The commercial intent of the BRI and its geopolitical drivers were camouflaged under this development cooperation rhetoric.

What about the GSI? In his Boao speech, Mr Xi was clearly responding to the fallout from the Russia-Ukraine war. GSI is defined as "indivisible security" or refraining from actions that seek to enhance one's own security by making another country more insecure. The concept of GSI was presented as a counter to what China considers an alarming relapse into an ideologically and militarily polarised international order, in which it is in danger of being lumped together with Russia and branded as an accomplice in Russia's war against Ukraine. The ideological factor is also important. In subsequent elaborations of Mr Xi's speech, there is a warning against attempts to divide the world between "democracies and autocracies." There is disquiet over the use of economic and financial sanctions to economically cripple adversaries. China finds itself acutely vulnerable to such pressure tactics. The GSI would impose a commitment not to resort to such sanctions and what Mr Xi referred to as "long arm jurisdiction." That China has not been averse to weaponising economic interdependency as a punitive instrument against those who may have offended it has been glossed over. Since there are many countries around the world that have concerns over the imposition of unilateral economic sanctions and becoming collateral victims in the process, China's GSI will find resonance.

Mr Xi's speech also reflects that following the Russia-Ukraine war, China finds itself on the defensive geopolitically. This is a clear departure from its earlier sense of confidence that the relative balance of power had shifted irreversibly in its favour, with a declining US, a divided Europe and an apprehensive Asia. The February 4, Sino-Russian Joint Declaration reflected the consensus of the two countries that the moment had arrived when they could together rewrite the rules of an emerging order that they would dominate. Both sought to ensure that their "adjacent areas" would be part of their respective spheres of influence. That tone of triumphalism is missing though the rhetoric against the US and the West has sharpened.

Fresh apprehensions are expressed about enhanced threats China may confront in Asia. Mr Xi devoted a considerable portion of his speech to Asia, describing it as an "anchor for world peace, a powerhouse for global growth and a new pace-setter for international cooperation." These positive factors are being threatened by recent developments which were spelt out subsequently by Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng in an address to international think tanks on May 6. Mr Le criticised the US for using its Indo-Pacific strategy to create a "second theatre" and that this attempt to create an Asian NATO would "bring horrible consequences and push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss."

Mr Le also responded to parallels being drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the fate which may await China if it tries to take Taiwan by force. He pointed out that Taiwan was recognised by the international community as formally being part of China and settlement of the Taiwan issue was its internal matter and that reunification was "inevitable." But he did not reiterate China's option of using military force to achieve this.

The overall impression one gets from reading these speeches and their further elaborations is that China sees that the "changes unseen in a lifetime", which had provided a strategic opportunity to advance China's geopolitical influence, are shifting in a more adverse direction. China senses it is confronted with greater vulnerabilities even as the more positive factors appear to be losing steam. Its economy has slowed down and the persistence of its zero-Covid policy is leading to prolonged economic disruptions. The manner in which Russia has been crippled by economic and financial sanctions has heightened China's vulnerability especially since its economy is far more integrated with the still West-dominated trade and financial systems. China may have declared victory too early. There are signs of a more cautious external posture going forward.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and a Senior Fellow CPR