frontiers in Political Science

TYPE Hypothesis and Theory
PUBLISHED 26 August 2026
DOI 10.3389/fpos.2026.1914439

OPEN ACCESS

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*CORRESPONDENCE
Gergely Salát
✉ salat.gergely@btk.ppke.hu

RECEIVED 20 June 2026
REVISED 24 July 2026
ACCEPTED 31 July 2026
PUBLISHED 26 August 2026

CITATION
Salát G (2026) China's networked order. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 8:1914439. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1914439

China's networked order

Gergely Salát*

Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary

This article reconstructs the structural logic of China's emerging vision of international order as expressed in its Four Global Initiatives on development, security, civilization, and governance, announced between 2021 and 2025. Rather than measuring the success of these initiatives or judging their normative content, the study asks what kind of order-building design they express when read together. Drawing interpretively on the science of networks, it argues that Beijing's initiatives are best understood as the programmatic outline of a centralized, hub-and-spoke architecture in which China positions itself as the connecting node linking many partners that are not strongly tied to one another. The network vocabulary is used as a qualitative, heuristic lens, not as a mathematical claim: the article does not compute network statistics but uses network concepts to organize and interpret official documents. The framework is developed through a structural reading of founding speeches, concept papers, and progress reports, and is illustrated with regional cases including the Belt and Road Initiative, China–Africa cooperation, China–Central and Eastern Europe cooperation, and the more polycentric Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS. The article situates this reading alongside established accounts of asymmetric interdependence and contested multilateralism, and shows what a network-structural perspective adds. It concludes by specifying the interpretive limits of the approach and an agenda for future, more formal analysis.

KEYWORDS
Chinese foreign policy, coalitional hegemony, Four Global Initiatives, hub-and-spoke, network science, preferential attachment, scale-free networks, world order

1 Introduction

The contemporary international system is undergoing a fundamental transformation whose scope and direction remain intensely debated in international relations (IR) theory. The US-led liberal order, briefly regarded after the Cold War as the only durable organizing principle, has been steadily eroding: institutional multilateralism is weakening, normative consensus is fragmenting, and new centers of power are emerging. The present era is therefore often described in terms of disorder: a transitional condition in which the old order is decaying while the new has yet to take shape. Yet disorder should not be understood only as the breakdown of order. Even as the old order erodes, major actors are actively imagining and constructing alternative orders. The key question, then, is not only what is breaking down, but what kind of order these actors envision amid disorder—and by what means they seek to realize it.

Much of the theoretical literature on the transformation of world order is framed in structural terms, treating states as actors to whom change happens and explaining transformation through impersonal processes such as power transitions, hegemonic cycles, or shifts in polarity: the hegemon declines, the balance shifts, and structure acts rather than the state. Over three decades, theorists have characterized this transitional era in successive waves—refining the

logic of polarity, from Krauthammer's (1990) unipolar moment and Wohlforth's (1999) unipolar stability to Huntington's (1999) uni-multipolarity, or abandoning it altogether, as in Haass's (2008) nonpolarity and Acharya's (2014) multiplex world. Yet this framing obscures a basic fact: the transformation of order is driven not only by anonymous forces but by the visions that concrete actors articulate and act upon. To understand global change, we cannot set aside the question of what order these actors propose.

One of these major actors is China. This article starts from the premise that Beijing is not merely a beneficiary of the changing global balance of power, but the architect of an articulated vision of order, one that can be reconstructed from Chinese foreign policy documents and practice. Its essence is a hierarchical network with China at its center as a hub. The vision, as reconstructed here, is not exclusive: it entails neither the dismantling of rival networks, nor the building of a closed bloc, nor demands of exclusive loyalty from partners.

This reading departs from the prevailing debate over whether China is a revisionist or status quo power. Recent scholarship has persuasively challenged the view that Beijing harbors expansive ambitions for global hegemony, arguing instead that its stated aims remain regionally focused, inherited, and limited (Kang et al., 2025, pp. 48–49). Yet to infer from the absence of classical hegemonic ambition that China is inward-looking is to miss what it is actively doing: building a global network of relations. The two propositions are compatible, because Beijing can decline classical hegemony precisely as it pursues a different form of preeminence, securing influence within existing institutions and building parallel structures where that influence is denied (Vörös, 2023). The order China imagines is therefore not the overturning of the board, but the occupation of the best position on it: not classical hegemony, but network centrality.

This starting point leads to the article's framing premise. Mainstream Western IR thought—from realism to theories of hegemony—typically conceives order in spatial, territorial, and exclusive terms: blocs, spheres of influence, and hegemonic control. By contrast, this article proceeds from the view that the Chinese approach to international relations is relational rather than territorial: it thinks in terms of relations and the networks built from them. This premise is not entirely new. IR has developed network-analytical approaches, discussed in Section 2, while the broader "relational turn" in IR—which shifts attention from actors to the relations constituting them—has drawn substantially on Chinese scholarship, where *guanxi* stands at the center of the conceptual vocabulary (Kavalski, 2018). The *guanxi* mechanism has also been applied historically, as in Eszterhai's (2018) interpretation of the Qing tributary system.

This relational conception of order has a lineage in international political economy, even if network-science vocabulary has not been applied to it. The claim that asymmetric economic ties generate political leverage is not new. Hirschman (1980, [1945], pp. 14–15) distinguished the 'supply effect' of foreign trade from its 'influence effect,' through which trade becomes a direct source of power by making disruption more costly for the weaker party. Farrell and Newman (2019, pp. 48–51, 54–58) restate this logic in network-topological terms: key global economic networks have converged toward "hub and spoke" systems in which some nodes are far more connected than others, and states controlling central nodes can "weaponize networks" through the panopticon effect—the ability to extract critical knowledge from information flows—and the chokepoint effect, the capacity to restrict or penalize third-party access to hubs. In the first quantitative study of hub attachment within this framework, Lehdonvirta et al. (2025) find that the topology of the US–China cloud network is shaped by economic forces and by spoke states' own strategic choices more than by great-power rivalry, restoring a degree of agency to third countries that earlier accounts treated largely as passive. Together, these accounts establish that hub position is a source of power and that link formation is a process worth explaining in its own right. Yet they approach that process from the outside: Hirschman and Farrell and Newman analyze the exploitation of asymmetric networks that already exist, while Lehdonvirta et al. (2025) explain attachment from the demand side, through the choices of the attaching states. What remains unaddressed, and what this article examines, is the supply side of the same process: how an aspiring hub designs and sequences the links that would make it a hub in the first place. This study accordingly reconstructs the architectural vision through which such asymmetry may be built—the construction of the hub position itself.

A parallel literature examines how rising powers respond to an order they did not design, explaining the motives and institutional forms of parallel order-building: the combination of accommodation with discursive delegitimation of the unipole (Schweller and Pu, 2011), the strains within the liberal order that enable contestation (Ikenberry, 2018), the conditions under which dissatisfied states reform or bypass institutions (Lipscy, 2017), contested multilateralism as regime shifting and competitive regime creation (Morse and Keohane, 2014), and institutional balancing as statecraft (He, 2009). This article's contribution is orthogonal: rather than asking whether China is revisionist or reformist, it identifies the structural signature of its order-building design. It argues that network-science vocabulary captures this signature more precisely than the institutionalist language of regime complexes, because it foregrounds the topology of link formation rather than the legal status of institutions. The claim is not merely that China conceptualizes international relations relationally or occupies hubs others have built, but that its initiatives, read together, articulate a program for constructing a hub of its own—a design best interpreted through Albert-László Barabási's theory of scale-free networks (Section 2.2). The article therefore treats China's initiatives and platforms primarily as network-building projects.

The empirical focus of the article is the Four Global Initiatives—the Global Development, Global Security, Global Civilization, and Global Governance Initiatives, launched between 2021 and 2025. These are analyzed not because they are the principal vehicles of China's global network-building—operationally, the Belt and Road Initiative and the more mature regional formats remain far more consequential—but because they articulate more clearly and programmatically than any other Chinese undertaking the aspirations and tools that inform Chinese network-building as a whole. China has launched "initiatives" before, but these were usually limited to particular groups of states; with the Four Global Initiatives, Beijing articulates explicitly global ambitions for the first time. Global in intent, they mirror China's ambitions more faithfully than any regional format can, even if they are not yet its main executors. As a reality check, the article also examines earlier regional formats: mature, operational arrangements that serve as proposition-generating contrasts through which the framework's plausibility and limits can be probed.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and its integration with the coalition-building literature; Section 3 sets out the network-science properties of China-initiated networks; Section 4 analyzes the Four Global Initiatives through

primary documents; Section 5 confronts the framework with regional cases; Section 6 discusses the theoretical implications; and Section 7 concludes.

2 Network theory and the relational turn in international relations

Network theory has been applied to international relations before, but the specific framework used here—Barabási's theory of scale-free networks—has not received systematic attention in the IR literature on China. This section reviews network analysis in IR, introduces the key concepts of Barabási's theory, and explains why this framework offers a more precise analytical instrument for understanding the structural logic of China's Four Global Initiatives.

2.1 Antecedents in IR network research

The network approach emerged as a distinct IR research program in the late 1990s. Drawing on relational sociology, Jackson and Nexon (1999) argued that the discipline's dominant "substantialism"—treating states as entities preceding their interactions—should give way to a relational view, in which state behavior is intelligible only through the structures in which states are embedded. Nexon and Wright (2007) applied this logic to imperial orders, showing that imperial power rests on a distinctive network structure: a "rimless" hub-and-spoke arrangement linking the core to each periphery while keeping the peripheries segmented from one another. This structure differs from both unipolar and hegemonic orders.

The methodological program of network analysis in IR matured with Hafner-Burton et al.'s foundational work (2009). They argued that network analysis offers both a methodological toolkit and theoretical propositions that reconceptualize power. Network power, defined through access, brokerage, and exit options, differs fundamentally from realist, capability-based conceptions, and later work extended this into large-scale empirical programs (Maoz, 2010).

Within the China-focused literature, Loke and Guo (2025) make a major recent contribution. They develop the concept of coalitional hegemony and analyze China's Indo-Pacific order-building through two complementary strategies: connectivity and association. Connectivity, grounded in relationality, builds relationships and networks; association, grounded in belonging, cultivates like-mindedness (Loke and Guo, 2025, p. 553). Connectivity operates through bridging, which organizes participants around shared goals; transactional recruitment through incentives and benefits; and binding, which creates asymmetric dependence. Association operates through bonding around shared values and othering, which sharpens an "us/them" binary by delegitimizing the rival great power (Loke and Guo, 2025, pp. 555–557).

These approaches share a limitation: they analyze the content and intent of connectivity and legitimation strategies carefully, but pay less attention to their structural logic—the mechanism through which such strategies generate a self-reinforcing topological dynamic. Barabási's theory provides a more precise framework for this purpose. Whereas the network-analytic program inaugurated by Hafner-Burton et al. (2009) and applied to economic statecraft by Farrell and Newman (2019) measures existing networks and derives power from observed centrality, this study uses network concepts interpretively to reconstruct a design intention expressed in official texts; the two programs are complementary, one establishing that hub position confers power, the other asking how a state articulates a plan to occupy it.

2.2 Barabási's scale-free networks

The theory developed by Barabási and Albert (1999) and later elaborated in *Linked* (Barabási, 2002) and *Network Science* (Barabási, 2016) identified several fundamental properties of real complex networks. The most relevant here is the power-law distribution of connections. Earlier random-network models, following Erdős and Rényi, assumed that nodes connect at random, producing a bell-shaped distribution of link counts. Barabási and Albert showed that real complex networks—including the World Wide Web, film-actor collaboration graphs, electrical power grids, and scientific citation networks—instead follow a power-law distribution: most nodes have few connections, while a small number of highly connected hubs hold a disproportionate share of all links (Barabási and Albert, 1999, pp. 510–511).

The mechanism behind this pattern is *preferential attachment:* new nodes attach not at random, but in proportion to existing connections, making already well-connected nodes more likely to attract further links. This self-reinforcing dynamic expresses the "rich-get-richer" principle: early, well-connected nodes accumulate new links faster than later, less-connected nodes, widening the gap between high- and low-degree nodes as the network grows. Such networks are called *scale-free* because their power-law distribution lacks a characteristic scale: a randomly selected node may have very few links or, in principle, an arbitrarily large number, while hubs can continue to grow without a fixed upper limit (Barabási, 2016, ch. 4, "The Meaning of Scale-Free"; ch. 5, "Growth and Preferential Attachment").

Pure preferential attachment, however, leaves a key question unresolved: if attachment depended only on existing connections, late entrants could never overtake the oldest node—yet in reality new entrants can become hubs, as Google did when it overtook earlier search engines (Barabási, 2016, ch. 6, 'Introduction,' p. 3). Bianconi and Barabási (2001b) addressed this problem with the fitness model, in which a node's probability of attachment depends not only on its degree but also on its intrinsic *"fitness"* (Barabási, 2016, ch. 6, "The Bianconi-Barabási Model," p. 4). Fitness captures the quality that enables some nodes to grow faster than their competitors.

Transposed to this study's interpretive register, fitness names the qualitative attractiveness of China as a partner-hub: the bundle of material inducements (financing, market access, infrastructure), procedural conveniences (a low-conditionality, non-interference framing), and normative appeals through which Beijing seeks to make attachment to its initiatives preferable to the alternatives. Fitness here is not a measured parameter but an interpretive placeholder for these competitive advantages; correspondingly, when a rival hub offers higher fitness in a given region, the model's expectation is qualitative—attachment migrates toward the more attractive hub.

2.3 Connectivity and association as the establishment of links

This article integrates Loke and Guo's connectivity–association pair with Barabási's network-science framework. Its key claim is one that prior literature has not made explicit: connectivity and association are not separate instruments, but two dimensions of the same

process. In network-theoretical terms, both refer to the establishment of links between nodes. Connectivity builds the link's technical infrastructure—platforms, meetings, institutions, and "groups of friends"—which would remain empty without normative content. Association supplies that content: it defines what is communicated through these platforms, what values are shared, and why participants regard themselves as like-minded. A link between two nodes is therefore never purely technical or purely ideational; it is both at once.

This relationship is especially clear in the 4GIs: the GDI Group of Friends draws states because the development-partnership narrative gives participation meaning, and the GSI's dialogue platforms are acceptable because indivisible security and nonintervention lend them legitimacy. Together they can be read through the preferential-attachment logic of the Barabási–Albert model: the design implies that the more connections a node already has to the Chinese hub, the more natural the next appears.

Link formation, however, is rarely driven by infrastructure and shared meaning alone. A third factor is material incentive, or the expectation of it. In Loke and Guo's typology, this is not external to connectivity but one of its modes: the transactional mode, which recruits support through incentives and benefits and may shade into the binding mode of asymmetric dependence. The promise of investment, infrastructure finance, market access, or development funding can give states a decisive reason to link themselves to the Chinese hub. China rarely names this incentive openly; instead, it frames it in normative language—"development assistance," "mutual benefit," and "win-win cooperation"—to avoid the appearance of transactionalism. Material inducement therefore belongs structurally to connectivity but appears in the language of association. This reinforces the argument: transactional substance and normative framing are two dimensions of a single link, and China's concealment of the former behind the latter is itself association performing legitimating work for connectivity.

This integration also clarifies how the Barabási–Albert model applies to the 4GIs. Here, preferential attachment should be understood not merely as the accumulation of endorsements, but as the self-reinforcing interaction of connectivity and association. Each new platform extends the reach of association, while each successful act of normative socialization increases the appeal of the next platform. Hub-and-spoke topology is therefore best read not simply as a function of link numbers, but as the structural implication of mutual reinforcement between network-building infrastructure and normative content.

2.4 Nodes and links: levels of analysis and the novelty of the framework

Before stating the framework's novelty, it is necessary to clarify what counts as nodes and links in international relational networks. At the highest level, nodes are states, connected to one another in complex ways. Since the number of states is finite, node-level growth is far more limited than in the canonical Barabási–Albert model, which assumes the continuous addition of new nodes. Yet the model's logic need not depend solely on node growth. Because interstate relations are complex, two states may be connected by multiple links; changes in the number and quality of these links provide the dynamism through which preferential attachment can operate. At a lower level, state institutions—ministries, agencies, financial organizations, state-owned enterprises, and even NGOs and private firms—also form networks within and across states. At a still lower level, the individuals working in these institutions constitute networks of their own, equally amenable to network-scientific analysis. The most precise account of China's external network-building would examine all three levels simultaneously. Because this article aims only to develop a theoretical framework, however, the analysis is limited to the highest level: states.

The article's novelty lies in applying the Barabási–Albert model to China's normative order-building strategy, specifically to the joint architecture of the Four Global Initiatives as understood through the connectivity–association framework. The argument is that the 4GI documents, read together, outline the design of a structured preferential-attachment mechanism whose material and normative layers mutually reinforce one another, orienting the network toward China as the indispensable hub of an alternative global order-building project. As Section 6.2 argues in detail, this design is structurally incompatible with the decentralized pluralism of Acharya's (2014) multiplex world theory. Beyond preferential attachment, Barabási's broader network-science framework offers a conceptual toolkit—fitness, disassortativity, and robustness—that the following sections apply selectively and Section 3 presents systematically.

To avoid slippage between levels of analysis, this article fixes the referents of its two core terms for the remainder of the text: a node denotes a state or a state-led collective actor participating in or endorsing a China-initiated framework, and a link denotes a formalized or semi-formalized relationship of participation and endorsement between such a node and the Chinese hub. Personal- and institutional-level phenomena, where they appear, are discussed only as mechanisms of state-level link formation, never as a separate network layer.

A conceptual distinction must be drawn between designed and emergent network growth. In the canonical Barabási–Albert model, preferential attachment is an emergent, demand-side process: nodes attach to well-connected nodes without central coordination. The phenomenon reconstructed here is different in kind. It is largely supply-driven: the record shows Beijing routing new initiatives through existing forums and summitry rather than waiting for autonomous attachment. This article therefore treats the four initiatives' architecture as a designed hub-and-spoke vision that borrows the vocabulary of preferential attachment to describe a centrally orchestrated process, while remaining explicit that genuine, autonomous demand-side attachment—partners gravitating to China without inducement—would have to be demonstrated separately and cannot be inferred from the architecture's design.

Figure 1 contrasts the monocentric design reconstructed here (panel A) with the polycentric and multiplex alternatives (panels B and C).

2.5 Research design, case selection, and method

This is a Hypothesis and Theory contribution whose method is interpretive and conceptual rather than statistical. The network-science vocabulary used throughout functions as a qualitative heuristic: a structured lens for organizing textual evidence, not a claim to have measured a network or fitted a degree distribution. No power law is estimated and no centrality metric is computed. Terms such as hub, link, disassortativity, and fitness denote qualitative features of an order-building design as expressed in documents, and the framework is offered as a conceptual scaffold that future quantitative work could operationalize.

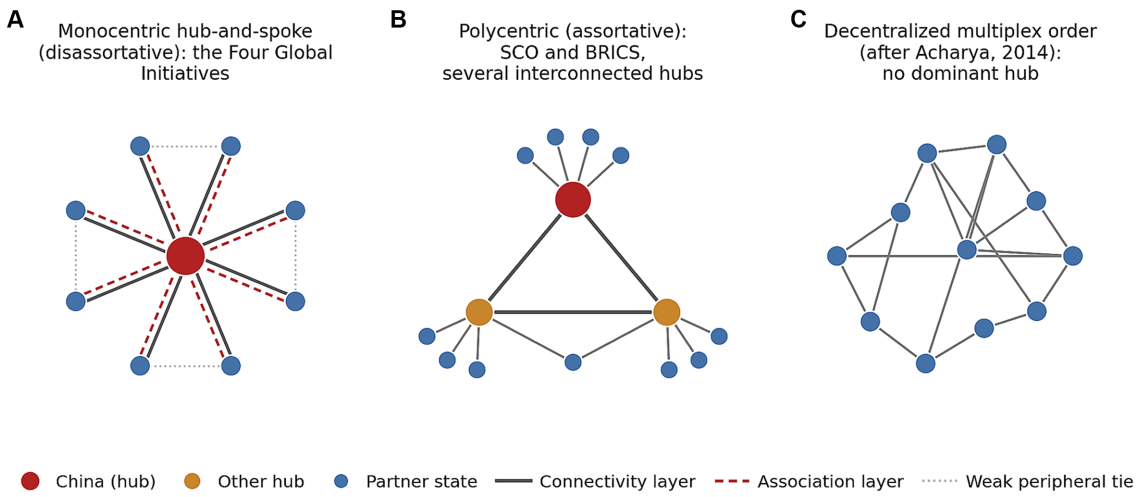

FIGURE 1
Three idealized topologies of order-building. **(A)** A monocentric, hub-and-spoke (disassortative) architecture corresponding to the Four Global Initiatives, in which China occupies the sole central node and partner states attach as spokes that are weakly or not connected to one another; each spoke link is shown as comprising a connectivity layer (material and procedural ties) and an association layer (normative and identity content). **(B)** A polycentric (assortative) architecture corresponding to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS, in which several interconnected hubs coexist and China is the largest but not the sole center. **(C)** A decentralized, multiplex order after Acharya (2014), in which many nodes of comparable weight are cross-linked with no dominant hub. The figure is a conceptual schematic; node and link placement are illustrative and carry no quantitative value.

The primary corpus consists of the Four Global Initiatives themselves, selected because they represent Beijing's most explicit and recent order-building vocabulary and because, unlike mature regional formats, they were designed as programmatic frames rather than operational bodies, making their structural logic unusually legible. For each initiative, the documentary basis includes the founding leadership speech, the corresponding concept paper or white paper where available, and subsequent official elaborations and progress reports. The corpus comprises fifteen official documents issued between 2015 and 2025. Twelve constitute the 4GI corpus proper (2021–2025): four founding leadership speeches, three Ministry of Foreign Affairs concept papers, two progress reports, one national security white paper, one UN General Assembly resolution, and one joint statement. The remaining three—the BRI's founding policy document and the SCO's Astana and Tianjin declarations—document the regional cases, for which the analysis otherwise relies on the area-studies literature cited in Section 5. The selection criterion was authoritative status: only leadership speeches and documents issued by state organs, the United Nations, or member governments were included, and all were analyzed in their official English versions. A full inventory appears in the Supplementary Table 1. The regional cases are selected as proposition-generating contrasts rather than for representativeness: the Belt and Road Initiative as the material substrate of link formation; China–Africa cooperation through FOCAC as a case of dense, sustained link formation; China–Central and Eastern Europe cooperation as link attrition in the presence of a rival hub; and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS as polycentric contrast cases in which China is the largest but not the sole hub. Together, these cases span substrate, high-density, attrition, and polycentric conditions, allowing the design logic to be examined across contrasting structural settings.

The documents were analyzed through a qualitative structural reading organized by a two-category scheme derived from Loke and Guo (2025): elements were read either as connectivity-layer content, meaning material and procedural link formation such as infrastructure, financing, mechanisms, and summitry, or as association-layer content, meaning normative and identity themes that give links their meaning. No coding software was used and no inter-coder reliability is claimed; the procedure is interpretive textual analysis, with the two categories serving as reading heuristics rather than a formal codebook. This design deliberately trades measurement for structural interpretation, and its limits are addressed in Sections 6.1 and 7.

3 The nature of China-initiated networks

The terms introduced in this section—hub, spoke, link, node, degree, disassortativity, and fitness—form an interpretive vocabulary rather than a measurement apparatus. Each identifies a qualitative feature of China's order-building design as expressed in official discourse and practice. When this article describes the architecture as scale-free or disassortative, it makes a claim about design logic and rhetorical structure, not about an empirically demonstrated power-law degree distribution. This vocabulary reveals patterns that a purely institutionalist account may obscure: centralization around a single connecting node, weak ties among spokes, and the combination of material and normative content within each link. The following glossary should thus be read as a set of analytical lenses whose value lies in interpretive redescription rather than proof.

3.1 What kind of order does China imagine?

China's network-building unfolds in three settings. First, China may join an existing network. It did so belatedly with the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO, owing to the isolationism and

self-reliance of the Maoist period. Such networks are often polycentric, with several hubs—including China's principal rival, the United States—present simultaneously. Within them, China engages other hubs and seeks gradually to transform itself from participant into hub. Second, China may co-found a network with states that are themselves plausible hub candidates. The SCO and BRICS are the clearest examples: these networks remain polycentric and comparatively assortative, with China operating as one center, however preponderant, among several. Third, China may create a network in which it is the sole hub. In this setting, where rival centers constrain its preferences least, China's imagined order appears most clearly.

Empirically, regional "+China" platforms reveal these preferences, but only the Four Global Initiatives articulate Beijing's global vision. In practice the 4GIs remain partial rather than genuinely global: neither the United States nor the European Union has expressed support, while India, itself a rival hub, has kept its distance. Their ambition nonetheless reveals the network-based order China imagines, even if their present reach does not match it.

This gap between ambition and reality points to a broader distinction between communication and structure. Official Chinese discourse depicts an egalitarian, hub-free network; analysis of actual processes reveals the hierarchical, hub-centered order reconstructed here.

3.2 Complexity, connectedness, and the multigraph

Read through the network lens, China-initiated networks resemble *complex* systems whose properties cannot be reduced to those of their components, yet they are not infinite: at the state level the number of nodes is finite, and the links among them, though far more numerous, remain tractable through treaties, shared memberships, and dialogue formats. They are also *connected*—any pair of nodes can in principle be linked—and they are *multigraphs:* the same two states may be joined simultaneously by developmental, security, commercial, cultural, and institutional ties, so no single dimension captures the relationship.

3.3 Weighted and directed links

China-initiated networks are best interpreted as *weighted* networks: not every link carries the same weight. Links of the same type—for example, membership in a single "+China" initiative—may involve relationships of very different intensity. As in complex networks generally, link weight is difficult to quantify. At the interstate level, China itself has sought to weight its relationships through an elaborate hierarchy of "partnerships," ranging from ordinary cooperative partnerships to comprehensive strategic partnerships and top-tier "all-weather" designations (Strüver, 2017; Zhang, 2025). This partnership network merits study in its own right, even though the boundaries between categories are loosely defined and the same nominal level may denote relationships of different intensity.

In this reading, the networks are also directed, or digraphs: a link from A to B does not imply an equivalent link from B to A. Applied to China's relationships, directedness captures hierarchy by identifying the direction in which narratives, capital, and technology flow. This leads to the most important property of Chinese networks, and the one most at odds with official rhetoric.

3.4 The hidden hierarchy

China frequently invokes the equality of states, yet the content of the relationships it establishes reveals a hierarchy. This is not open subordination but a pattern in which China acts as initiator, standard-setter, lender, technology exporter, and great power, while its partners appear as followers, borrowers, and importers. The relationship is unequal by virtue of China's weight and great-power position, and this inequality is amplified by network structure, its preponderance reinforced by its hub position. The hierarchy resonates with Loke and Guo's (2025) coalitional hegemony—a partial hegemony based on a restricted legitimating audience and constituency of support, derived from Clark's (2011, p. 62) account of hegemony in international society.

3.5 Path length, clustering, and the hub position

The hub-and-spoke structure of China-initiated networks would imply very low *path length*: at the interstate level, any country could typically reach another in one step, or at most two, through China. Where a direct link between peripheral nodes is absent or severed—as between Iran and Saudi Arabia until China brokered their reconciliation in 2023—the Chinese hub can act as intermediary; but where one party lies outside the network, as with westward-oriented Ukraine, China cannot mediate, even when it offers to.

The *clustering coefficient* captures how far a node's partners are also partners of one another: it is high when nearly every pair of a country's partners maintains its own bilateral tie, and low when they connect only through the central node. Here the measure must be read with care. If the mere existence of diplomatic relations is counted, clustering among China's partners is high, since almost all states maintain formal ties with one another. But this reflects the density of the interstate system as a whole, not the structure of the China-initiated networks examined here. Within those networks—considering only the links that actually carry developmental, security, or normative content—the ties among peripheral states are thin, and it is China that channels the traffic between them. The pattern is sharper still below the state level, where some actors communicate exclusively through Beijing—channels that matter here only as mechanisms reinforcing state-level centrality (Section 2.4).

This pattern reflects the *disassortative* character of hub-and-spoke networks. Barabási distinguishes assortative networks, in which hubs preferentially connect to one another, from disassortative ones, in which "the hubs avoid each other, linking instead to small-degree nodes," producing a hub-and-spoke character (Barabási, 2016, ch. 7, "Assortativity and Disassortativity," p. 5). China-initiated networks correspond, in this reading, to the second type: the spokes connect overwhelmingly to the central hub rather than to one another, so links run predominantly between the high-degree hub and low-degree nodes. It is precisely this property that separates the 4GI architecture from assortative, multi-hub formations such as the SCO and BRICS, where hubs connect to other hubs—a distinction taken up again in Sections 5.4 and 6.2.

3.6 Growth and preferential attachment

The hub role itself increases room for maneuver. China's continual creation and expansion of networks is consistent with a basic property

of scale-free networks: the larger a scale-free network grows, the larger its hubs become (Barabási, 2016, ch. 4, "Hubs," p. 11). Barabási's model also describes an extreme case, *Bose–Einstein condensation*, in which a single node with exceptional fitness captures a dominant share of all links, eliminating the hierarchy of competing hubs altogether (Bianconi and Barabási, 2001a; Barabási, 2016, ch. 6, "Bose-Einstein Condensation," p. 15). Nothing in the present evidence suggests that Beijing pursues such a winner-take-all outcome, and the article's argument does not require it: China's aim, as reconstructed here, is to occupy the central position within the networks it builds, not to absorb every link in the international system.

As networks grow, the logic of preferential attachment can be expected to come into play: new nodes tend to attach to already well-connected nodes—here, China. Since expansion depends on multiplying links rather than adding states (Section 2.4), this helps explain China's proliferation of meetings, mechanisms, platforms, and dialogues; because hub size grows with network size, link creation becomes partly an end in itself, even where no immediate benefit is apparent.

Network science distinguishes two origins of preferential attachment (Barabási, 2016, ch. 5, pp. 23–26): a local mechanism requiring no global knowledge, and a global, optimized one in which each new link reflects a cost–benefit calculation. In China-initiated networks the optimized variant appears more significant—states decide through rational deliberation that joining is worthwhile—which in turn requires the hub to make participation attractive.

3.7 Fitness: cultivated attractiveness

As Section 2.2 noted, pure preferential attachment would give an insurmountable advantage to early entrants; the Bianconi–Barabási *fitness* model explains how a latecomer can nonetheless prevail. Barabási's own formulation is instructive here: fitness is not conferred by any single actor but reflects how the network as a whole perceives a node's importance relative to others (Barabási, 2016, ch. 6, "Measuring Fitness," p. 8). In China's case, this attractiveness initially arose partly from economic growth: its vast market and labor force constituted fitness in themselves. In the networks examined here, however, fitness is also produced through policy: the offering of benefits that make other countries wish to connect. The stronger this fitness, the faster and wider the growth of the hub-and-spoke network. Hub status is not permanent, however: sustaining fitness requires continuous investment.

3.8 Robustness and vulnerability

In terms of robustness, China-initiated networks resemble scale-free networks: they would be highly resistant to random node failures, because such failures usually affect peripheral nodes that play only a limited role in holding the network together. The loss of the hub, by contrast, could fragment the network (Barabási, 2016, ch. 8, "Robustness of Scale-free Networks," pp. 14–15). The analogy requires qualification. In interstate networks the hub does not vanish: China will not disappear from the international system. What the model captures is the functional equivalent of hub removal—a decline in the hub's pull, whether through a change of leadership that redirects Beijing's priorities, through the erosion of the benefits that made attachment attractive, or through unexpected shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Individual departures are a different matter: Italy's exit from the BRI in 2023 left the great majority of participants in place and the hub's position intact. Where the center's pull declines, however, links atrophy and nodes depart in succession, and a format can hollow out entirely—as the China–CEEC Cooperation shows, its waning attractiveness compounded by the countervailing gravity of the EU, with the withdrawals following as much as driving that decline (Section 5.3).

4 The Four Global Initiatives as a networked normative architecture

The Four Global Initiatives—the GDI (2021), the GSI (2022), the GCI (2023), and the GGI (2025)—constitute the most systematic exercise in normative projection in Chinese foreign policy to date. This section examines all four through primary Chinese sources: Xi Jinping's founding speeches, Ministry of Foreign Affairs concept papers, progress reports, white papers, and official statements. The documentary record is uneven across the four, and that unevenness is itself analytically revealing. The point of departure is an observation rarely emphasized: the center of gravity of these documents lies less in their proclaimed goals than in the construction of contact platforms, meetings, institutions, and liaison mechanisms—relationships through which participants communicate about development, security, civilizational dialogue, or global governance, and within which China structurally occupies the role of indispensable hub. Reading the initiatives this way is an analytical choice rather than a claim of exhaustiveness: the 4GIs also serve branding, soft-power, discourse-power, and domestic-legitimation functions, all addressed in a substantial literature.

The analysis follows the integrated framework developed in Section 2. For each initiative, it distinguishes the connectivity and association layers in the two-layer terms set out in Section 2.3, without restating that framework.

4.1 The Global Development Initiative: network-building in developmental garb

Xi Jinping announced the GDI on September 21, 2021, at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly (Xi, 2021). The founding speech identified six principles: commitment to development, a people-centered approach, equality and inclusiveness, innovation-driven growth, harmony between humanity and nature, and results-oriented action. As subsequent Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents and progress reports show, these principles primarily serve a framing function: they legitimate and structure the relationship-building mechanisms that form the GDI's operational core (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Center for International Knowledge on Development, 2023, 2025).

4.1.1 The connectivity layer

A textual examination of the GDI concept paper and progress reports shows that their center of gravity lies in relationship-building infrastructure. The GDI Group of Friends, established at the United Nations in New York on January 20, 2022, functions as a communication platform organized around regular meetings, ministerial sessions,

and joint statements. The progress reports list high-level meetings, sessions of the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development, the Global Development Promotion Center and its network, the project-pool coordination mechanism, and capacity-building programs. This catalogue contains all three modes of Loke and Guo's connectivity strategy: the bridging mode, through shared development forums; the transactional mode, through the USD 1 billion top-up of the South–South Cooperation Fund and project financing; and the binding mode, through the asymmetric attachment of project-dependent states.

4.1.2 The association layer

The GDI's normative layer defines the themes through which Beijing constructs "like-mindedness" with the developing world: development as the "master key to all problems" and a prerequisite for protecting human rights; acceleration of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as a shared cause; the provision of "more development resources to developing countries" to enhance their "self-generated development capacity"; and the restoration of development to the center of global policy coordination. In the documents' framing, this agenda responds to the "development divide" between North and South and to the deficit in the "representation and voice" of developing countries in global governance. Read against the grain, this is a bonding rhetoric grounded in shared developing-world grievances. It proved especially effective after the pandemic, when vaccine inequality gave the Chinese narrative a concrete anchor. The GDI thus offers not only money, in the transactional mode of connectivity, but also identity: it positions participants as members of a "global development community," with China, on the reading advanced here, as its largest and most powerful member.

4.2 The Global Security Initiative: the Chinese frame for security communication

Xi Jinping announced the GSI on April 21, 2022, at the Boao Forum (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Its six principles—indivisible security, multilateralism, a sovereignty-based order grounded in the UN Charter, dialogue-centered conflict resolution, interconnected security, and the development–security nexus—establish a normative framework for security communication. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs concept paper of February 21, 2023, operationalizes this framework through twenty priority areas and concrete cooperation platforms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The initiative's incorporation into China's core security doctrine is signaled by the 2025 national security white paper, which devotes a dedicated chapter to the GSI (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

4.2.1 The connectivity layer

The backbone of the GSI's institutional design is relationship-building infrastructure, set out most explicitly in Section IV of the GSI Concept Paper, "Platforms and Mechanisms of Cooperation." It includes China-hosted security dialogue forums—the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the Lianyungang Global Public Security Cooperation Forum, the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, and the Middle East Security Forum; multilateral mechanisms in which China is a constitutive member, including the SCO, BRICS, CICA, the China+Central Asia mechanism, and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation; the ASEAN-centered regional security architecture; and law-enforcement, military, and police-academy training cooperation, including 5,000 training opportunities for developing countries over five years. Engagement with bodies beyond China's own memberships, such as the African Union and the League of Arab States, is framed less as coequal coordination than as Chinese support for others' efforts on specific dossiers. Across these mechanisms, the structural pattern is consistent: China proposes, hosts, funds, or convenes, while other participants connect through China rather than directly to one another.

4.2.2 The association layer

The GSI's construction of like-mindedness centers on security sovereignty. The principle of indivisible security—that no state may build its security at the expense of another's—directly challenges NATO's collective-defense logic and appeals to states excluded from, or opposed to, Western alliance systems. The rejection of unilateral sanctions, the critique of a "Cold War mentality," and the vision of "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security" provide a security identity in which authoritarian and nonaligned states alike can recognize themselves as "like-minded." The othering mode appears more sharply than in the GDI: the national security white paper names its targets directly—the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," the "Asia-Pacific version of NATO," and the "small circles" that, on the reading adopted here, point to arrangements such as AUKUS and the Quad. The 2023 Saudi–Iranian mediation offered a practical demonstration: China sought to show that dialogue-centered conflict resolution was a functioning alternative, not merely empty rhetoric.

4.3 The Global Civilization Initiative: the network of ideational communication

Xi Jinping announced the GCI on March 15, 2023, at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting (Xi, 2023). Unlike the GSI and GGI—each accompanied by a dedicated Ministry of Foreign Affairs concept paper—the GCI has produced neither a concept paper nor an official progress report. Its authoritative articulation remains Xi's address and its four advocacies: respect for the diversity of civilizations, the common values of humanity, the connection between cultural heritage and innovation, and people-to-people exchange. These advocacies are deliberately broad: almost every political culture can find in them an element consonant with its own vocabulary, and the wider the normative umbrella, the more nodes can be drawn in. Where the GSI specifies mechanisms and the GGI enumerates governance principles, the GCI remains a purely normative, low-commitment point of attachment—the easiest of the four initiatives for partner states to endorse.

4.3.1 The connectivity layer

Without a codifying concept paper, the GCI's connective infrastructure is not set out in a single document. Instead, it is assembled partly from preexisting channels retrospectively gathered under its

umbrella: interparty dialogue forums convened by the CPC's International Department, including the meeting at which the GCI was announced; conference formats for "dialogue among civilizations"; Chinese cultural institutes; and media-cooperation platforms. The most concrete institutional anchor to date is the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations, observed on June 10, established by UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/286, adopted on June 7, 2024, on China's proposal and co-sponsored by more than eighty states (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). The target audience is characteristically subnational and transnational: political parties, intellectual elites, and cultural institutions. Such relationships operate below the level of state diplomacy and are therefore harder to sever when governments change. Under the definitions fixed in Section 2.4, these subnational ties do not constitute a separate network layer but function as mechanisms of state-level link formation: party-to-party and elite channels cultivate affinities that lower the political cost of formal state alignment. The GCI's most concrete institutional outcome illustrates this direction of travel: an initiative announced at an interparty forum was subsequently converted into state-level links when more than eighty governments co-sponsored resolution A/RES/78/286—acts of endorsement that fall squarely within the definition of a link adopted in this article.

4.3.2 The association layer

Among the four initiatives, the GCI is the purest expression of the association strategy: the bonding mode constitutes its very content. Its construction of like-mindedness rests on four themes: civilizational equality, according to which no civilization stands above another; the plurality of paths to modernization, with modernization distinguished from Westernization, a claim resonant with postcolonial states; rejection of the imposition of "values or models on others," which delegitimizes democracy promotion and human-rights conditionality; and a culturally relativized vocabulary of the "common values of humanity"—"peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom" (Xi, 2023). As Section 6.3 argues, this normative construction bears the implicit imprint of Tianxia thinking (Zhao, 2021) and *guanxi* logic (Qin, 2018). The GCI thus provides the normative vocabulary spoken on the platforms of the other three initiatives. Here, the association layer is not a complement to connectivity but its precondition.

4.4 The Global Governance Initiative: the institutional consolidation of the network

Xi Jinping announced the GGI on September 1, 2025, at the SCO Plus meeting in Tianjin (Xi, 2025). The GGI concept paper, published on the same day as the founding speech and thus indicating advance preparation, sets out five core concepts and identifies three deficiencies in the existing global governance system: the serious underrepresentation of the Global South, the erosion of the authority of the UN Charter's purposes and principles, and the urgent need for greater effectiveness (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

4.4.1 The connectivity layer

Among the four initiatives, the GGI has moved from declaration to institutional infrastructure with the greatest visible speed. The concept paper remains general, referring to UN, regional, and subregional platforms and naming priority areas—international financial reform, AI, cyberspace, climate change, trade, and outer space—of which the technological domains (AI, cyberspace, outer space) increasingly fuse security and innovation rationalities (Haddad et al., 2024)—rather than enumerating mechanisms. The decisive network-building step came with implementation: the Group of Friends of Global Governance, established at UN headquarters in New York on December 9, 2025, roughly 3 months after the founding speech, with 43 member states and chaired by China's permanent representative to the UN. Its founding joint statement, issued the same day, framed the group around the UN's founding legacy and the authority of the UN Charter, describing it as "a significant step in implementing the Global Governance Initiative" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2025). The diplomatic working method rehearsed in the GDI—a China-convened Group of Friends serving as a standing coordination platform at the UN—is thus reproduced, with China as the proposing and chairing node.

4.4.2 The association layer

The GGI's construction of like-mindedness centers on institutional reform and multilateral justice. Its key themes are the opposition between "true multilateralism" and what it presents as the false multilateralism of Western-led institutions; correction of the Global South's representation deficit as a shared cause; sovereign equality as the guiding principle of institutional reform; critique of selective rather than "equal and uniform" application of international law, and of "double standards"; and, in digital and AI governance, the framing of these domains as urgent governance challenges in which UN authority and the equal participation of developing states must prevail. These themes synthesize the normative vocabulary of the preceding three initiatives. For a state that has accepted the right to development in the GDI, indivisible security in the GSI, and civilizational equality in the GCI, the GGI's institutional-reform agenda appears not as a new normative claim, but as the logical consequence of the earlier ones.

4.5 The connectivity and association layers across the four initiatives: a synthesis

Table 1 summarizes the connectivity and association layers of the four initiatives. It provides an empirical mapping of the integrated framework developed in Section 2.3: each row identifies the relationship-building infrastructure established by an initiative, or connectivity, and the themes through which it constructs a community of "like-mindedness," or association.

The table reveals two patterns. The first is a division of labor: the initiatives display different connectivity–association ratios. The GDI and GGI are connectivity-dominant, placing institution-building at the center while association serves mainly as legitimating background. The GCI is association-dominant: normative content constitutes the initiative's substance, while its connectivity infrastructure remains comparatively light. The GSI balances the two. This division of labor is not accidental: together, the four initiatives span the full spectrum of connectivity and association, which no single initiative could achieve.

The second pattern is cumulativeness: association themes build on one another across the initiatives. The right to development in the

TABLE 1 Connectivity and association layers in China's Four Global Initiatives.

Initiative	Connectivity layer (concrete elements)	Association layer (like-mindedness themes)
GDI (2021)	GDI Group of Friends (UN; established on January 20, 2022, in New York); high-level meetings and sessions of the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development; the Global Development Promotion Center and its network; nodes in the Global Knowledge Network for Development; the GDI project-pool coordination mechanism; the USD 1 billion additional contribution to the South–South Cooperation Fund, raising the renamed Global Development and South–South Cooperation Fund to USD 4 billion, along with project financing; capacity-building training sessions, study tours, and knowledge-exchange programs	The primacy of development as the "master key to all problems" and as a prerequisite for human rights; acceleration of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as a shared cause; provision of greater development resources to enhance developing states' "self-generated development capacity"; bonding rhetoric grounded in the North–South "development divide" and in the deficit in developing countries' "representation and voice"; a shared identity of belonging to a "global development community," with China presented as its largest member
GSI (2022)	Beijing Xiangshan Forum; Global Public Security Cooperation Forum in Lianyungang; China-Africa Peace and Security Forum; Middle East Security Forum; multilateral coordination mechanisms in which China is a constitutive member (SCO, BRICS, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia [CICA], "China+Central Asia," and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation); ASEAN-centered regional security architecture; law-enforcement and military/police-academy training cooperation (5,000 training places over 5 years)	Indivisible security (a critique of NATO's collective-defense logic); rejection of unilateral sanctions; noninterference; rejection of "Cold War mentality" and "bloc confrontation"; delegitimization of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and an "Asia-Pacific version of NATO," with AUKUS and the Quad as implicit referents; dialogue-centered conflict resolution, exemplified by Saudi-Iran mediation
GCI (2023)	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC) interparty dialogue forums (the venue for the GCI announcement); Dialogue among Civilizations conference formats; networks of Chinese cultural institutes; media-cooperation platforms; UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/286, which established the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations (June 10; adopted on June 7, 2024); subnational and transnational elite ties	Civilizational equality, based on the claim that no civilization stands above another; modernization as distinct from Westernization; rejection of any imposition of "their own values or models on others," thereby delegitimizing democracy promotion; a culturally relativized vocabulary of the "common values of humanity" (peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom)
GGI (2025)	Group of Friends of Global Governance (UN; 43 founding members; established on December 9, 2025, roughly 3 months after the founding speech); the concept paper refers to UN, regional, and subregional platforms and to priority areas, including reform of the international financial architecture, AI, cyberspace, climate change, trade, and outer space, rather than offering a fixed catalog of mechanisms	"True multilateralism" contrasted with what Chinese discourse portrays as the false multilateralism of Western-led institutions; remedying the Global South's representation deficit; sovereign equality; criticism of the selective application of international law rather than its "equal and uniform" application, and of "double standards"; AI and cyberspace framed as domains requiring urgent governance under UN authority and with equal participation by developing states

GDI underpins the development–security nexus in the GSI; indivisible security in the GSI underpins civilizational equality in the GCI; and civilizational equality in the GCI supports the demand for institutional equality in the GGI. Once one step is accepted, the next appears natural. This is the normative dimension of the preferential-attachment analogy described in Section 3.6: the design orients the network toward a hub position from which China's normative content would be disseminated.

The design's topology also has a clear implication: what the documents outline is not a reciprocal, horizontal network, but a hub-and-spoke system. Peripheral states generally maintain bilateral relations with Beijing, but within the 4GI framework they interact with one another only minimally, if at all. By design, China is the only actor present on every platform, at every meeting, and in every mechanism—the sole node through which all others communicate. This asymmetry conflicts with Acharya's genuinely multiplex order, as discussed in Section 6.2, despite the initiatives' rhetorical emphasis on equality, reciprocity, and diversity.

Read together, the four initiatives outline a single normative architecture, but treating it as already integrated in practice would overstate the evidence. The documents present a programmatic and partly aspirational design: a set of frames sharing a common hub-centered structural grammar that could, if consolidated, function as an integrated whole. Their integration remains one of Beijing's stated ambitions rather than an accomplished fact, while mature regional formats remain operationally more significant than the initiatives intended to encompass them.

5 Hub-construction in practice: regional cases

We do not yet know how a world organized through China's global initiatives—a world corresponding to Beijing's vision—would actually function. Partial examples do exist, however: China has already achieved "in miniature" what it seeks to accomplish on a larger scale through the global initiatives. Several regional "+China" formats illustrate the value of the network-theoretical approach and different aspects of its logic. China has built a range of such formats, including the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, the China–CELAC Forum, and the China–Pacific Island Countries framework. This section examines a selection of cases: the BRI, as the material substrate of the hub logic; FOCAC, as a relative success; the China–CEEC Cooperation, as a failure; and the polycentric SCO and BRICS, as cases that reveal the limits

of hub-and-spoke construction. These cases are therefore not mere illustrations, but proposition-generating contrasts that probe the workings and limits of China's hub-and-spoke logic.

5.1 The Belt and Road Initiative: network-building made literal

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, is the paradigmatic Chinese network-building project—and the one in which network-building is partly literal. At one level, the BRI entails the construction of physical infrastructure networks: railways, ports, pipelines, fiber-optic cables, and overland corridors. Yet all five of its pillars—policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015)—are also forms of relationship-building. Each pillar establishes a distinct type of link between the participating node and the Chinese hub; together, the five produce precisely the multigraph structure described in Section 3.2, in which several parallel links connect two nodes. The BRI is thus the material substrate of the hub logic that the Four Global Initiatives extend into the normative domain.

5.2 The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation: the hub-and-spoke prototype

FOCAC, established in 2000, is among the most successful and durable formats of Chinese multilateral diplomacy. Its structure is paradigmatically hub-and-spoke: 53 African states—all except Eswatini—participate alongside the African Union Commission. Each maintains a bilateral relationship with China, while horizontal institutional ties among African participants within the FOCAC framework remain limited or absent. The forum meets every 3 years, and China—not the African members—drives the agenda, shapes the packages offered, and frames the joint declarations.

FOCAC's network-building logic closely resembles that of the 4GIs: its center of gravity lies less in substantive agreements than in the creation of contact mechanisms. Alongside triennial conferences and summits, FOCAC has generated numerous subforums, including the China–Africa Think Tanks Forum, the Forum on China–Africa Media Cooperation, the Forum on China–Africa Local Government Cooperation, and the China–Africa Young Leaders Forum (FOCAC, n.d.; Li et al., 2012). Each creates an additional link between African states and Beijing, while horizontal ties among African members remain comparatively thin. The case is analytically valuable because it demonstrates both the longevity and durability of hub-and-spoke logic: over a quarter century, FOCAC has not evolved into a more horizontal network, but has continued to channel cooperation through Beijing, preserving China's indispensable brokerage role.

FOCAC's durability can also be explained through the fitness model. Temporal priority alone cannot explain China's emergence as the central hub of African multilateral relations: former European colonial powers and the United States had been present on the continent far longer. China's high fitness—infrastructure financing with fewer political conditions, rapid decision-making, a credible narrative of South–South solidarity, and the principle of noninterference—enabled it to become the fastest-growing node despite its relatively late entry.

5.3 China–CEEC Cooperation: the vulnerability of hub architecture

The cooperation framework between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries—launched in 2012 as 16 + 1, expanded to 17 + 1 after Greece joined in 2019, and reduced to 16 + 1 after Lithuania's withdrawal in 2021 and to 14 + 1 after Estonia and Latvia followed in 2022—was structurally analogous to the FOCAC-type "+China" format, but with one crucial difference: eleven of the sixteen founding participants were EU member states, and thus embedded in a rival normative and institutional order. This dual membership made the framework a revealing test of the limits of hub architecture. The hub did not collapse; its European periphery eroded selectively. All three withdrawals came from EU members, while the non-EU participants remained. Yet most EU members also stayed, which suggests that the rival hub's gravity opened the possibility of exit without determining it. Following the withdrawals, activity among the remaining participants declined sharply, and by 2023 the format had effectively ceased to function.

The causes of this erosion were structural. Growing tension with the EU's common foreign and security policy altered the cost–benefit calculation of membership: the benefits of ties with Beijing were increasingly outweighed by EU political pressure and reputational risks. The deeper cause, however, lay in the hub itself. The opportunities on which CEE states had pinned their hopes—large-scale Chinese investment, infrastructure financing, and market access—proved largely illusory. As the gap between promise and delivery widened, the hub's attractiveness declined (Matura, 2019). China did not leave the network, but the weakening of its pull had a similar functional effect: peripheral nodes began to detach.

Here the hub-and-spoke topology reveals its characteristic fragility. Because the spokes lack direct links with one another, declining hub attractiveness leaves no horizontal solidarity to preserve the network—the robustness paradox discussed in Section 3.8, whereby hub-and-spoke structures lack the redundancy that distributed architectures provide (Baran, 1964). The 17 + 1 thus illustrates a second failure mode: the hub was not destroyed but lost its appeal, and the spokes detached gradually—some formally, others quietly—in a peripheral erosion rather than a central collapse.

The case does not refute the reading that hub architecture is the recurrent design pattern of China-initiated formats; it is consistent with it, while showing that the architecture works only under conditions. First, preferential attachment is sustainable only while the hub remains more attractive than its alternatives: once the anticipated economic benefits failed to materialize, and with a strong rival hub present, China's position became contestable. Second, the dual strategy holds only where connectivity and association remain balanced, as in FOCAC; in the China–CEEC case, association never functioned effectively. These are interpretive claims rather than demonstrated causal ones. The evidence cannot specify the threshold at which relative fitness triggers detachment; the network reading identifies the direction of pressure, not its tipping point.

5.4 The SCO and BRICS: polycentric networks

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is partly a Chinese initiative, but differs fundamentally from the "+China" platforms discussed above. Whereas FOCAC, China–CEEC cooperation, and similar formats are single-centered, star-shaped networks with China as the sole hub, the SCO contains other potential hubs. Alongside India, Russia can occupy a hub role, particularly in relation to Central Asian members, with which it retains close historical ties dating to the Soviet period. Russia currently aligns with China and operates largely within its orbit, but this has not always been true, nor is it necessarily permanent.

Network theory clarifies why the SCO differs from the preceding cases. In China–CEEC cooperation, China's hub position was eroded by a more attractive rival hub outside the network: the EU. In the SCO, potential hubs exist within the network itself. The organization therefore cannot be described as a single-centered hub-and-spoke structure: several nodes possess hub properties, and members do not connect exclusively through China. India's resistance to Chinese normative framing illustrates this polycentrism. Neither the Astana Declaration (2024) nor the Tianjin Declaration (2025) adopts the vocabulary of the Four Global Initiatives; even the 2025 summit, chaired by China and used by Xi to launch the Global Governance Initiative, produced a declaration that does not mention it (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2024; President of Russia, 2025). Endorsement of the Belt and Road Initiative appears in both documents, but only through eight individually listed members, with India conspicuously absent.

India's standing as a hub rather than a spoke extends beyond the SCO. The fate of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM)—a BRI project rather than an SCO undertaking—is instructive. Initially included among the BRI's six economic corridors, the BCIM gradually disappeared from BRI documents and was dropped from the project list at the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019 after India declined to attach. Where a node with its own hub properties refuses to connect, the network-building effort that depends on it stalls.

BRICS, which partly overlaps with the SCO, yields similar lessons. It likewise contains several potential hubs; indeed, all its original members were regional hubs in their own right. BRICS therefore cannot be understood as a hub-and-spoke network, but as an assortative network in which hubs connect to other hubs. Under the distinction developed in Sections 3.5 and 6.2, this is the opposite of the disassortative, star-shaped topology of the 4GI architecture. An assortative network—a system of interconnected hubs—stands structurally closer to Acharya's multiplex order than to China's hub-centered vision, and corresponds to the topology shown in Figure 1B.

5.5 The lessons of the cases

Taken together, the cases suggest four propositions. First, the hub-and-spoke logic did not emerge with the 4GIs but has been a recurrent organizing pattern of Beijing's formats since at least 2000; the regional formats remain its operationally weightier vehicles, while the 4GIs constitute its most systematic, explicitly global, and normatively dense layer. Second, the sustainability of hub architecture is context-dependent: FOCAC endured because no strong rival hub was present and the association layer was genuinely operative, whereas the China–CEEC Cooperation failed because the EU's normative and institutional gravity proved stronger and association never took hold. Third, the hub position is self-reinforcing: through preferential attachment, the more relations converge on Beijing, the more valuable the position becomes. Fourth, hub-and-spoke logic is topology-dependent—it can form only where peripheral nodes are not themselves hubs, as the SCO and BRICS show.

The cases are best read as generating propositions rather than confirming them. The pattern fits the framework's expectations, but consistency is not proof: both outcomes were established by area-studies scholarship on independent grounds, and the network reading reorganizes rather than replaces those accounts. The value of the network lens is that it renders these disparate outcomes commensurable within a single structural vocabulary and specifies what future work would need to test.

6 Discussion

This section draws together the theoretical implications of the study and places the argument in dialogue with alternative interpretations. It first discusses the payoff and limits of the proposed network-theoretical framework, then relates the argument to Acharya's multiplex world theory and to Chinese relational IR theories, and finally clarifies the framework's analytical value in relation to existing accounts of Chinese order-building.

6.1 The limits of the Barabási framework

The preceding sections have illustrated the analytical value of applying the Barabási–Albert model. The cumulative, sequential pattern identified in the documents is consistent with what the logic of preferential attachment would lead one to expect—an interpretive analogy rather than a formally demonstrated process—while the star-shaped hub-and-spoke reading captures the 4GI architecture more accurately than frameworks centered on the rhetoric of equality and reciprocity. The framework's limits, however, require equally clear acknowledgment.

This analysis is conceptual and analytical rather than formal quantitative modeling. Qualitatively identifying a mechanism in the documents differs from measuring a network's statistical structure: the article has not measured node degrees, calculated a power-law exponent, or verified a genuinely scale-free distribution. This is consistent with other network-theoretical adaptations in IR (Nexon and Wright, 2007; Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). The article offers an interpretive framework rather than a completed measurement, providing conceptual scaffolding for later quantitative analysis. A more fundamental obstacle reinforces this limitation. The 4GIs are not organizations with formal memberships, but loose and shifting networks of endorsers. Except for the Global Governance Initiative's Group of Friends—the only initiative for which China published a named roster, listing 43 states in December 2025—Beijing does not disclose its supporters. Reported figures such as the GSI's "over 100" and later "over 130" countries are neither fixed nor independently verifiable. Endorsement is also uneven, ranging from membership in a UN Group of Friends to a single official's supportive remark. Combining these into one "support" figure exaggerates the coherence of a fluid, largely

undisclosed constituency, further justifying a conceptual treatment of topology rather than precise enumeration.

The empirical universality of scale-free networks has also been contested. Examining nearly a thousand real-world networks, Broido and Clauset (2019) argue that genuinely scale-free degree distributions are rare under strict statistical criteria, and that social networks are at most weakly scale-free. Their critique has itself faced methodological objections: van der Hoorn et al. (2020) identify significant problems in its classification and hypothesis-testing procedures. The status of the scale-free concept therefore remains an open question in network science, not a settled refutation. For this argument, however, the debate has limited force. It concerns whether large empirical networks display power-law degree distributions under rigorous statistical testing, whereas this article makes no such claim. It uses the Barabási–Albert model not as a statistical hypothesis to fit to data, but as a conceptual model of mechanisms—preferential attachment, the self-reinforcing gravity of hubs, and fitness as deliberately produced attractiveness—that illuminate Chinese network-building. Moreover, the finite and relatively small universe of states makes rigorous power-law estimation unsuitable at the interstate level.

A further limitation concerns intentionality. The Barabási–Albert model is descriptive: it identifies emergent structure but cannot prove that Beijing deliberately designed it. Official texts reveal an articulated vision and a sequence of initiatives consistent with hub construction, but cannot distinguish deliberate architecture from *post hoc* rationalization of opportunistic moves, or design from organic uptake. Such intentionality cannot be established from public documents alone. The article therefore advances only the weaker, defensible proposition that the documents express a coherent design logic rendered legible by network vocabulary. This is not a retreat from the question posed in the Introduction: an articulated vision is itself an object of analysis, and reconstructing it does not require access to decision-makers' subjective intent.

6.2 The Acharya critique: multiplex world or hub-centered hierarchy?

Amitav Acharya's multiplex world theory (Acharya, 2014) is among the most influential contemporary IR accounts of the post-unipolar order. For Acharya, the multiplex world is not multipolar in the traditional sense, but a system in which overlapping institutions, norms, identities, and actors coexist without any power imposing a unified hegemonic narrative. Its central principle is plurality: different civilizational and political traditions participate in global order-building on formally equal terms.

The present analysis suggests that the 4GI architecture is structurally incompatible with this vision. The incompatibility stems not merely from Beijing's ambitions, but from the logic of hub-and-spoke topology. Acharya's multiplex world is decentralized: no actor becomes the indispensable broker of communication among all others. The 4GI architecture, by contrast, centralizes developmental, security, civilizational, and governance communication through the GDI, GSI, GCI, and GGI. China is the only permanently present node, while participants connect primarily to Beijing rather than to one another. The multiplex model can accommodate China as one participant among many, but not the structural logic through which Beijing organizes the others around itself. The contrast between the two topologies—a monocentric architecture on the one hand, a decentralized multiplex order on the other—is shown in panels A and C of Figure 1.

The China–CEEC Cooperation case suggests that a possible multiplex order depends not on suppressing Chinese ambition, but on the presence of countervailing hubs. The EU's institutional architecture, which connects its members horizontally, offered an alternative locus of attachment that China's hub-and-spoke logic could not match in Central and Eastern Europe. A genuinely multiplex order therefore requires other actors to maintain similarly strong hub positions capable of generating competing gravity. Where such hubs are weak or absent, China's architecture operates under far fewer constraints.

The same caution applies to the polycentric and failed corridor cases. In the BCIM corridor, India acts as a rival hub that keeps its distance—not as a cautious participant, but as a competing center of gravity rejecting attachment on its own terms. The claim that the EU or India outcompeted China's hub fitness is a persuasive narrative redescription, not structural proof: this analysis specifies no mechanism linking a given level of fitness or link weight to node detachment. This does not weaken the framework, but clarifies its descriptive and generative rather than strictly causal function.

6.3 Chinese IR theories: self-legitimation and structural self-identity

The normative rhetoric of the 4GIs—equality, reciprocity, civilizational diversity, and the common values of humanity—resonates with a strand of Chinese IR theory that, over the past two decades, has supplied an intellectual vocabulary for Beijing's order-building narrative. Two figures are particularly relevant: Qin Yaqing and Zhao Tingyang. The point of invoking them is not to vindicate China's self-image, but the opposite: to show that the decentralized, hub-free order this rhetoric implies finds little support even in the intellectual traditions on which it draws. Both traditions, on the reading advanced here, are compatible with an order organized around a center.

Qin's relational theory (Qin, 2018) elevates the logic of *guanxi* networks into an IR ontology, foregrounding relationships rather than autonomous, self-interested actors. Qin himself emphasizes reciprocity and mutual constitution. On this reading, a *guanxi* order can also generate a center around which relations are organized, and reciprocity rhetoric can conceal the resulting asymmetry without abolishing it. Read this way, the 4GI architecture presents China not as a hegemon, but as the network's natural central node—the position implicitly assumed by the 4GI documents when they describe China as the promoter of common development. *Guanxi* logic therefore does not refute hub-and-spoke topology; it culturally naturalizes it. Zhao's Tianxia model (Zhao, 2021) performs a similar function from a different angle: it imagines a hierarchical but non-hegemonic order in which the center organizes the periphery through cultural and moral authority rather than force, recognizing civilizational plurality in principle while arranging it around that center. What liberal IR reads as a contradiction—proclaimed equality alongside centralized hierarchy—Tianxia thinking presents as the natural form of order.

The hub-centered hierarchy that emerges from the 4GI architecture thus stands not only against liberal universalism, but in resonance with China's own intellectual traditions: Tianxia is openly hierarchical, while *guanxi* becomes hierarchical in effect when translated into order-building. This congruence sharpens the critique of Acharya. If the theoretical vocabularies on which Beijing's narrative draws themselves naturalize organization around a center, then a decentralized, genuinely multiplex order finds no support in the very traditions to which that narrative appeals.

6.4 Connectivity, association, and the coalitional-hegemony dialogue

The present approach converges with Loke and Guo's (2025) coalitional hegemony, which rejects—as this article does—a binary "US versus China bloc" reading. The two interpretations nonetheless differ in emphasis. Loke and Guo stress the fluidity of legitimating constituencies: regional states selectively opt into American and Chinese coalitional hegemonies across issue areas, suggesting systemic openness and the preservation of agency. The topological reading developed here, by contrast, points to the durability of structural asymmetry: preferential attachment and the cumulative layering of connectivity and association gradually narrow the scope for selective entry and exit. The fluidity that Loke and Guo observe may therefore characterize an early phase of network-building rather than a permanent property of the system. The two frameworks are thus not rivals but temporally complementary: coalitional hegemony captures the agency states retain within the process, while the scale-free network model identifies its structural direction.

7 Conclusions, limitations, and research agenda

The present era is often described in the vocabulary of disorder: the old US-led order is decaying, while a new one has yet to take shape. This article has argued that disorder is not merely the breakdown of order, but a condition in which major actors actively construct alternatives. In the parts of the world it can reach, the order China imagines is a hierarchical network encompassing as many countries as possible, with Beijing at its center. Analyzing this vision through Albert-László Barabási's scale-free network theory yielded two mutually reinforcing findings. First, the documents of the Four Global Initiatives are essentially network-building plans: contact platforms, meetings, groups of friends, and coordination mechanisms form their backbone, while proclaimed goals provide legitimation and framing. Second, the initiatives' sequential introduction and joint architecture mirror the logic of preferential attachment: China is the only actor present across all four initiatives, while connectivity and association reinforce each other—a design analogy offered as a proposition for future testing, not a demonstrated dynamic.

A crucial caveat follows. This study sought to reconstruct the logic of China's order-building vision—its structural grammar—not to assess its success. Whether the architecture produces the centrality it seeks, and whether the spokes remain attached and the hub holds, are empirical questions this analysis cannot settle; the regional cases in Section 5 show only that the outcome is contested. The Four Global Initiatives may prove to be one among Beijing's many network-building undertakings, or may eventually fade. What this study isolates is the underlying logic of Chinese network-building, which the fate of any particular initiative would not by itself invalidate.

The strategy's prospects, however, are another matter. China is unquestionably an active shaper of order, not merely its passive object. The vision reconstructed here—articulated most explicitly in the Four Global Initiatives, even as its operationally most significant expressions remain the Belt and Road Initiative and mature regional formats—expresses a coherent design logic, whatever the degree of deliberate orchestration behind it. Yet the limits of this design—the presence of rival hubs, the vulnerability of hub architecture, and the fragility of relationships lacking the association layer—show that realization of China's vision is far from inevitable. Amid disorder, no single order is emerging; competing visions coexist, and which of them takes shape depends not on automatism but on the strategic agency of the actors themselves.

This conclusion has a structural corollary. If the most effective check on hub logic is the competing gravity of a rival hub, as the China–CEEC Cooperation case suggests, the relevant variable is whether other actors occupy and maintain such positions. From this perspective, the conduct of the Trump-era United States is analytically significant. Even as China builds networks, the United States has withdrawn from international organizations, loosened alliances, and stepped back from multilateral forums, vacating hub positions that could generate competing gravity. Whether this retrenchment proves consequential remains an empirical question. The framework suggests only that this retrenchment bears on the variable it identifies as most constraining.

Several research questions follow. The most immediate concerns the detachment mechanism left open here: the conditions and threshold of relative hub fitness at which a node's attachment to the Chinese hub weakens or reverses. Without this, the network reading remains a generative redescription rather than a causal theory. A second concerns formalization. A formal analysis of the 4GI networks—processing data on state participation and endorsement, engagement intensity, institutional activity, and overlapping affiliations—could test and refine this article's conceptual findings quantitatively, examining whether a power-law distribution or traces of preferential attachment appear in the temporal sequence and density of link formation. A third concerns rival hubs: systematic study of competition among the EU, India, ASEAN, Russia, and other potential hubs could identify where the 4GI architecture operates with few constraints and where it encounters structural limits. A fourth is whether the architecture can move beyond its largely developing-world base to become genuinely global; the GGI's long-term institutional development, as the newest and most explicitly universal initiative, will provide an early indicator. Finally, extending the analysis from states to the institutional and personal levels identified in Section 2.4 would yield a fuller picture of Chinese network-building.

This article has not sought to pronounce a normative judgment on the desirability or danger of China's vision of order. Its aim has been to offer a more precise analytical lens for understanding how China imagines order amid present disorder, and to show that behind the rhetoric of equality and reciprocity lies a structurally hierarchical, hub-centered logic of network-building. That architecture, it bears repeating, is one China's initiatives so far articulate as a design rather than realize as a built order. Understanding this logic, rather than evaluating it, is the central task. In debates over the future of global order, structure matters at least as much as intent, and network theory provides a sharper instrument for grasping both than traditional frameworks based on blocs and spheres of influence.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

GS: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Claude (Anthropic; Claude Opus 4.8 and Claude Fable 5) assisted with idea development, text analysis, source identification, language and structural editing, English rendering of the author's ideas, drafting passages, generating Table 1, verifying quotations and citations, and, at the revision stage, addressing reviewer comments, preparing Figure 1, drafting the response to reviewers, and performing final consistency and error checking. ChatGPT (OpenAI; GPT-5.5) checked formatting and grammar. All substantive content is the author's own; the author verified all AI-assisted text and takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1914439/full#supplementary-material

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