



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

CHINA'S NEW MODEL OF GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE
FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under the concept of Community of Common Destiny for Mankind,¹ the People's Republic of China (henceforth referred to as 'China') has brought together a suite of initiatives that represent a new international relations framework, through which it aims to reform global governance. These include the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which is the most tangible manifestation of a wider development: China's evolving engagement in international crime prevention. Framed in a way that encompasses both traditional and non-traditional security, China's international promotion of the GSI has implications for global crime prevention norms. While China's capacity to shape these norms should not be overstated, the GSI has already achieved a degree of uptake beyond countries commonly grouped as the 'West', including in global pariah states such as Syria. At the same time, analysis that looks predominantly at the impact of the GSI in liberal democratic states, or that considers the parameters most useful in analyzing liberal democratic legal systems, risks overlooking broader shifts in security norms.

The GSI and associated Chinese party-state endeavours use familiar terms (for example, 'rule of law') in ways that are different from their more commonly understood meanings in the context of the so-called liberal international order. In addition to issues of meaning and language, there are fundamental differences between the GSI and existing norms related to accountability and power that demonstrate vast divergence between the existing order and what is proposed, creating potential hazards for those working on global crime prevention. The characteristics of the GSI are best understood in the context of China's domestic approach to crime prevention, in which the party-state is vested with vast powers and the law is best seen as a tool utilized by the political elite. This suggests that substantive international cooperation with China on crime prevention would be possible only where it aligns with the interests and principles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Beginning from the perspective that all proposals with the capacity to shape global crime prevention norms merit scrutiny, this report explores the broader implications of China's proposals before detailing two case studies that allow for deeper examination of potential risks associated with the approach. By revealing previously unknown networks and relationships, the findings suggest there could be a gap between principle and practice. A pushback by China against cybercrime hubs in South East Asia, for example, includes instances where the party-state appears to demonstrate a high tolerance for organized crime. These cases raise questions about whether the Chinese party-state is prepared to

associate with serious criminals when doing so would enable it to further its objectives abroad, for example as part of its cultivation of political elites.

The findings of this report, within the context of a growing body of evidence, suggest that use of the term 'geocriminality', may be useful in explanation and conceptualization of state-crime nexus phenomena. The term here refers to a state's use of criminal actors to achieve objectives in target countries, in the same way as the term geoeconomics describes the manipulation of economic tools in target countries to the same ends. This report is intended as an exploratory assessment of this issue and concludes that further research is merited.



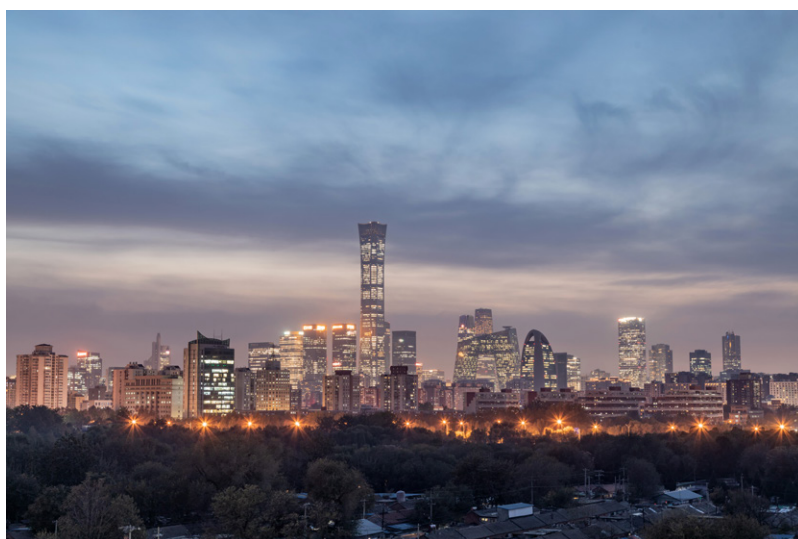
The Great Hall of the People in Beijing is home to the world's largest legislative body, the National People's Conference. Chinese party-state norms are gaining wider coverage internationally, including in the field of crime prevention. © VCG/VCG via Getty Images

INTRODUCTION: A SHIFT IN THE LANDSCAPE

The global crime and crime prevention environments are never static. Geopolitical shifts, for example, spill over into these environments, creating new risks and opportunities that those working in the field must attempt to comprehend. The People's Republic of China's (henceforth 'China') decades-long growth spurt and accompanying upturn in international presence marks just such a shift. On the eve of the high-level general debate of the 78th United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2023, China issued a proposal 'on the reform and development of global governance'.² The text contained references to various other proposals and initiatives that the Chinese party-state had previously disseminated in its proposals for global governance reform. However, the piece released ahead of the General Assembly debate stands out as the most comprehensive account, offering a more cohesive vision and providing further detail on how the patchwork of ideas will interlink. Among the grand ambitions and the declaration that 'humanity is once again at a crossroads', the proposal includes a reference to the GSI.³

Away from high politics and extravagant rhetoric, the well-publicized spread of Chinese criminal networks across the Asia-Pacific region has caused alarm among China's neighbours.⁴ Long-standing triad organized crime networks have merged with, and in some cases been replaced by, contemporary transnational networks. A major police operation in Singapore in August 2023 illustrated some of the characteristics of one particular network, revealing extensive money-laundering activities, vast assets and recently obtained citizenships from countries around the world. According to an unidentified

China's rapid economic development has come to be associated with regional and global economic integration, but integration in the field of global governance is proving to be far more complex. © Gao Zehong/VCG via Getty Images



source quoted by *The Straits Times*, several of the 10 people arrested and charged with various offences were related to one another, and all were originally from the province of Fujian in eastern China.⁵

Global crime prevention is subject to a multitude of factors and dependent on a spectrum of global actors. The developments outlined above point to significant transformations in transnational crime and the norms surrounding crime prevention, and hint at the reasons why an objective, provisional assessment of China's impact on international crime prevention is now essential for those operating in this domain, such as lawmakers and law enforcement actors. China's growing international influence over a broader set of conventions includes multiple agreements with second countries and organizations that explicitly refer to crime prevention, discussed in further detail below. The significant disparity between prevailing global crime prevention norms and China's domestic approach potentially adds another layer of uncertainty.

Lost in translation: persistent errors in analysis of the Chinese party-state

While there has been an increase in awareness and analysis of China's growing international presence and its potential impact, research is often hamstrung by misinterpretation of party-state literature and actions, or by mirroring, the act of projecting one's own values onto distinct actors. These pitfalls have affected several studies, including those concerned with security and crime prevention. Such misinterpretation is also a central reason why relatively few have understood the potential consequences, for good or ill, of the Chinese party-state's approach to global governance. The disparity between the proposed governance model and what currently exists is obscured by the use of familiar terms in unfamiliar ways.

The Decoding China project is a laudable attempt to address some of these differences.⁶ Many of the Chinese party-state documents considered in this report, for example, contain references to 'security', but, as the project points out, national security and state security are considered synonymous (国家安全). References in government literature to 'state security' actually mean 'the consolidation of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling position and to its protection from domestic and foreign threats'.⁷ The emphasis on the party-state, rather than the individual, as the beneficiary of state security is reflected in Article 2 of China's National Security Law and is accompanied by 'an underlying assumption in China that those who act in line with the interests of the ruling class should enjoy safety'.⁸ The meaning employed here,

which is easily missed in seemingly innocuous references to 'security', has significant implications for the approach to crime, including the engagement with and accountability of political elites of other nations and sanctioned individuals.

Party-state documents cited in this report also include references to the 'rule of law', another fundamental element of global crime prevention approaches. Again, the Decoding China project points out that the party-state term is closer to 'ruling the country in accordance with the law' (依法治国) and 'has very little in common with the liberal democratic concept', understood broadly as the political ideal that no one is above the law.⁹ Highlighting a feature of the party-state that should guide any form of international cooperation on crime prevention, it has been observed that 'the CCP ultimately sees the law as a tool to ensure stability and order, as well as being a means to justify and maintain Party rule'.¹⁰

These examples are but two of many. The cumulative effect of numerous differences is that, from the perspective of an international audience, the meaning of documents and commentary published by the Chinese party-state is often shipwrecked in an ostensibly calm sea of familiar language. As China's international presence and influence continue to grow, it is even more important that analysis of the country includes not only Mandarin Chinese sources, but a broader sense of China literacy that includes the political logic of the party-state. ■

One episode in 2017, primarily concerning law and justice, illustrates some of the more sizeable gaps between the Chinese party-state perspective and that of the so-called liberal international order on criminality and crime prevention. Such gaps should be carefully considered by those working in the global crime prevention sphere, in terms of the potential risks generated. In a speech to legal officials in Beijing in January, the chief justice of China's Supreme People's Court, Zhou Qiang (周强), said that 'we should resolutely resist erroneous influence from the West: "constitutional democracy", "separation of powers" and "independence of the judiciary"', adding that judges must 'safeguard the party and the People's Army's glorious history'.¹¹ The obvious implications of this for approaches to criminality were evident in the response from eminent Chinese legal scholar He Weifang (贺卫方), who argued that the chief justice's speech 'had made it clear that he was demanding obedience from the judiciary'.¹² Already pushed out of a job at one of China's elite universities, He was ultimately forced off social media and out of activism as a result of his advocacy for legal reform.¹³ This positioning of the law itself as a tool of the elite political class is not unique to China, but when combined with China's enhanced ability to shape international norms, it marks a new development in the modern era. The consequences could reverberate far and wide, with particular repercussions for global crime prevention.

While reports of recent espionage accusations and charges in Germany and the UK respectively have reignited Cold War-style commentary, this report addresses issues that are typically quite separate from traditional ideas of interference and state competition.¹⁴ At the core of this report is a dual analysis that looks first not at criminality itself, but at the manner in which the concepts of criminality and crime prevention are shifting in the wider contestation around global standards. Demonstrating a commitment to investigate and record changes in the global crime prevention landscape, this section is primarily concerned with Chinese party-state proposals such as the GSI and potential developments they could (intentionally or unintentionally) engender. The second part of the report compares party-state rhetoric with examples of engagement that potentially identify important characteristics and novel risks. In comparing the two, the final section assesses the impact of ongoing geopolitical vicissitudes on global crime prevention efforts and considers lessons for dealing with this complex and multifaceted issue.

The report's methodology is based on an open-source intelligence approach. This involved examining (and, importantly, cross-referencing) a combination of sources such as business records, media coverage, state announcements and speeches, and existing research for context. The author's experience and network in China was an important part of the analysis of the data produced using this method, for example in hypothesizing the formal and informal meanings of Chinese media coverage or official pronouncements. While the project did not include formal interviews, it benefited from informal discussions with others working in the field on related topics.

The purpose of this report is not to take a position in the wider debate around competing models of global governance, but rather to assert that any such model or intervention merits scrutiny. In this report, such scrutiny is centred on the potential implications for transnational organized crime and its prevention. The growing traction that Chinese party-state proposals are gaining beyond China's borders, and the increasing frequency with which transnational crime and crime prevention are explicitly mentioned in China's joint statements with second countries, suggests that an initial impact assessment is now advisable.



A NEW CONCEPTION OF SECURITY?

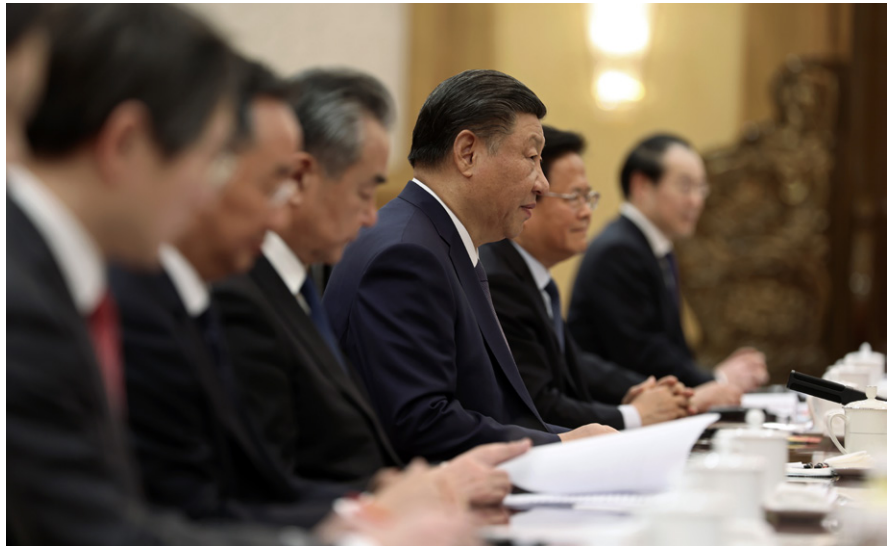
On 21 April 2022, Chinese leader General Secretary Xi Jinping announced ‘a Global Security Initiative (GSI) to promote security for all in the world’ during a keynote speech at the annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia. In sketching out the GSI, the speech made reference to ‘common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security’, while emphasizing the need to respect ‘the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, uphold non-interference in internal affairs, and respect the independent choices of development paths and social systems made by people in different countries’.¹⁵

While the broad vision depicted does not appear particularly contentious, the implications are received very differently depending on the audience. Unpicking some of those implications, political scientist David Arase points out that the GSI’s rendering of security ‘stands against the idea of humanitarian intervention and the international community’s “right to protect” in cases of human rights violations’, while also resisting ‘the use of legal sanctions to punish violators of international norms’.¹⁶ Xi concluded his Boao speech by hinting at China’s ability to guarantee the security and development of governments that sign up to the GSI agenda.¹⁷ There is much else of note in Xi’s speech, not least his reference to ‘indivisible security’, or the idea that each state’s security is inextricably linked to that of its neighbours. A relic of the Helsinki Accords, ‘indivisible security’ was more recently employed by Russia in justification of its invasion of Ukraine.¹⁸ This element speaks to the geopolitical rather than the crime prevention domain considered here, with the GSI as a whole encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security. Although the trend of growing Chinese party-state purchase on global norms related to crime and crime prevention does not begin and end with the GSI, the creation of the initiative serves as an important checkpoint and is considered ‘Xi’s favored vehicle for externalizing the comprehensive national security concept’.¹⁹

The precise terms of the GSI remain ambiguous, which is not unusual when policies of this nature are announced by the party-state. The most concrete element is a list of ‘six commitments’ (六个坚持), which themselves contain various imprecise assertions, such as calls for ‘joint cooperation to advance world peace and security’ and ‘mutual respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries’.²⁰ Further meaning can be gleaned from a careful reading of relevant speeches and official statements – for example, Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong’s speech at the 2023 Conference of Global Public Security Cooperation Forum. Wang ties the GSI to other initiatives (discussed below) and presents them together as a solution to ‘accelerating once-in-a-century changes’.²¹

Chinese President Xi Jinping attends a meeting with Uruguayan President Luis Lacalle Pou. Xi has overseen efforts by the Chinese party-state to establish a more assertive international presence.

© Florence Lo-Pool/Getty Images



This is an important reference as it helps to contextualize the framing – the phrase, or some variation of it, has been repeatedly employed by the highest echelons of China's political class, including Xi Jinping himself. These changes were discussed at length during the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in Beijing in June 2018, and were the final words exchanged between Xi and Russian president Vladimir Putin at the end of a two-day meeting in March 2023.²² Wu Zhenglong, a senior research fellow at the China Foundation for International Studies, suggests that the term refers to

a fundamental change in the transfer of global power. For the first time in the modern era, global power has began [*sic*] to shift to the non-Western world. A large group of emerging economies and developing countries have risen together, causing the world's economic focus to move to the Asia-Pacific region and resulting in the East rising while the West declines.²³

Wu picks up on the matter in Xi's speech, noting 'a focus on the reshaping of the world order and improvements to global governance mechanisms'.²⁴ In this context, Wang's framing of the GSI as a solution to these changes speaks to the importance the Chinese party-state attaches to it, and conveys the way the party-state sees its role in global governance reform. Of course, none of this guarantees international uptake, but in light of China's growing international profile and role as a development financier, the potential implications should be taken seriously, including in the realm of crime prevention.

The initiative is part of a package of concepts that, taken together, appear to represent an alternative to the liberal international order that has constituted much of the arena in which and through which international politics have played out since the end of the Second World War. The GSI sits alongside similar ventures that China has made in other spheres, forming a trio with the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative. Together, these initiatives are promoted by the party-state as 'Chinese wisdom to promote global development, enhance mutual security, and strengthen exchange and mutual learning among civilizations, injecting new impetus into the cause of human peace, development, and civilization'. They are brought together under a principal concept: the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind (人类命运共同体) (also translated as 'Community with a Shared Future for Mankind').²⁵ This overarching concept was the subject of a heavily promoted white paper by the State Council Information Office published on 26 September 2023, which went further than any other party-state output in revealing the desire of China's elite political class to transform the international system.²⁶ There is overlap between these initiatives and the better-known Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI), for example in the need for security at sites and in regions where BRI projects are underway, but the trio can be seen as a new wave of outward engagement launched much later than the BRI.²⁷ While the GSI and the broader push to reshape ideas related to global security norms are primarily geopolitical in nature, there are clear and significant repercussions for global approaches addressing transnational organized crime.

Beyond the Global Security Initiative: difference and departure

The GSI comes amid other recent developments and long-standing features of the Chinese party-state that will affect the country's international engagement in crime prevention. A confidential internal document circulated within the CCP in the early stages of Xi Jinping's leadership provides a useful insight into the party-state approach to various factors related to crime prevention, such as civil society and judicial independence. Amid attacks on constitutional democracy and claims that the CCP alone can interpret history, 'Document Number 9' proclaims that civil society is 'an attempt to dismantle the ruling party's social foundation', while going on to attack Western notions of universal values (freedom, democracy and human rights) and freedom of the press.²⁸ Although the document originally came to light in 2013, it still provides valuable background for assessing the potential outcomes of international engagement with China in various areas, including those discussed here.

While CCP literature frequently refers to the 'rule of law', as noted above, the party's use of the term has a very different meaning from, and is probably incompatible with, its use in the international arena, where it is based on principles of accountability and impartial justice. The potential impact on law has secondary consequences for crime prevention. For example, recent guidance on the rule of law issued to CCP cadres tells them that they must 'truly learn, understand, believe in, and apply Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law', hinting at some of the compatibility issues such conceptions of law might have vis-à-vis existing global crime prevention norms. The guidance went on:

[Cadres] should continue to work on deepening internalisation and transformation, starting from the ideological level, purify the ideological root, cultivate the foundation of faith, supplement the spiritual calcium, stabilize the rudder of thought and become staunch believers, active disseminators, and model practitioners of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law.²⁹

This guidance should be seen in the context of the party-state's own media, where an article on Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law lists the first principle as: 'Maintain the Party's leadership of the rule of law'.³⁰ This suggests a divergence between the liberal international order's understanding of the rule of law as a concept, which could raise questions about cooperation on international criminal matters and the consequences of the wider dissemination of the CCP's approach. International cooperation with China, for example, is more likely in areas that align with the party-state's conception of crime and crime prevention norms. There is a possibility that such cooperation over a long period could, by focusing predominantly on Chinese party-state priorities and potentially neglecting concerns that the party-state considers invalid, further entrench Chinese party-state norms internationally.

These potential risks related to engagement and dissemination are also present, for example, in the recent foreign relations law, a product of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy. In addition to foregrounding foreign policy as a means of sustaining the CCP's leadership position, China's foreign relations law 'provides a legal basis for the diplomatic struggle against sanctions'.³¹ While this is very likely intended as a primarily geopolitical measure against US sanctions targeting China, it also has implications for



Delegates attend a session of the National People's Congress, the highest organ of state power in China. There are significant gaps in attitudes to power and accountability between Beijing and countries of the liberal international order. © *Guang Niu/Getty Images*

sanctions as a tool against crime more broadly. Two major criminals associated with the case studies that follow, for example, have both been targeted by sanctions. While the use of sanctions as a tool is rightly subject to scrutiny and criticism, any measures that weaken their effectiveness in general are likely to benefit the criminals whom they target, many of whom are responsible for serious crimes.³²

Finally, a recent drive to assess a wider selection of factors through the prism of security, or 'the securitization of everything', is likely to have consequences for China's international engagement on crime prevention. A report by European think-tank MERICS (Mercator Institute for China Studies) on Beijing's concept of Comprehensive National Security touches on the GSI in that context, bringing the analysis full circle. Noting that 'national security and stability are now framed as the highest political priority and preconditions for continued economic development',³³ the report explains that Beijing's vision for the new global security order follows the same logic. It continues:

While the GSI and its role in the global security architecture is still taking shape, the 'security' in its name implies Beijing's emphasis on state sovereignty, regime stability and collective security. Described as an extension of Xi's comprehensive national security outlook, it may provide affiliated states with a wide remit to justify almost any action under the banner of security, and heralds a further clash of international norms.³⁴

The implications and associated risks of this for approaches to criminality are clear. A security framework that provides heads of affiliated states with a wide remit for action in the name of security could have far-reaching implications for criminal activity and state relationships with crime.

For all of these issues surrounding China's alternative to the existing international system, it is at the same time important to acknowledge the myriad problems associated with the liberal international order. Indeed, the capacity for criticism is one of the features of that order. There are three central

reasons why China's alternative vision deserves special attention from those working to combat transnational organized crime:

- In those countries most closely associated with the liberal international order, the nature of the order is such that there is scrutiny and debate from within and beyond the state in a way that does not and cannot exist in the case of the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind and associated initiatives. This degree of contestation and transparency is particularly important in the field of crime prevention, where themes of information, power and abuse are ubiquitous.
- The Community of Common Destiny for Mankind and related initiatives are relatively new concepts and much work remains to be done to understand the precise implications for crime prevention and related issues, such as international cooperation in the fight against organized crime. Rather than forming part of the ongoing geopolitical tussle, new plans that would affect global norms in this realm should be carefully examined first because of their novelty. Any consequences are best understood (and if necessary, addressed) early.
- There is an inevitable sense of incompatibility between China's approach to security and the existing international order, presenting various potential hazards. This raises questions about how the two systems will interact and overlap. While there is an ongoing competition for influence within the institutions associated with the liberal international order, such as the UN, we also see evidence of the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind approach transmitted through Chinese bilateral agreements and individual relationships with organizations. This is likely to affect various spheres, including crime prevention.

High concepts and hard politics

The potential implications for global crime prevention of a Chinese party-state alternative to international norms can be demonstrated in a small number of concise examples. The apparent contradictions are evident in the case of, for example, Nepal, where a shift is taking place at a distance away from pre-eminent arenas of global governance such as the UN. Nepal is seeing both a growing presence of criminality that can be linked to Chinese organized crime within its borders and deliberate moves to adopt China's approach to crime prevention. In a joint statement that followed a state visit by Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal to China in September 2023, the two countries outlined a range of areas in which they would continue or deepen cooperation.³⁵ Rather than vague niceties about collaboration, the statement included concrete steps related to joint capacity building and cooperation in law enforcement training:

The two sides maintained that law enforcement cooperation is of great significance to the security of the two countries, and agreed to further strengthen information exchange, capacity building and cooperation on training between their law enforcement institutions. The two sides agreed to expedite the ratification of the China-Nepal Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters.³⁶

At the same time, Nepal has not escaped the region-wide proliferation of criminality associated with Chinese syndicates, particularly in the realm of cybercrime and the associated hubs.³⁷ Several recent examples include a July 2022 raid on a call centre in Nepal's Lumbini province, belonging to Blue Sky Business Solutions. Blue Sky Business Solutions is reportedly headquartered in China, and the centre in Lumbini involved 258 Nepalese youths who were used to commit fraud, largely involving lottery scams.³⁸

Nepal's experience of increasing Chinese network-linked crime within its borders and deepening official law enforcement entanglements with China is not unique, but it is a good illustration of these two related criminal developments that appear most prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region. In other countries where bilateral crime-prevention links are especially durable, we are beginning to see the operationalization of the ambitions connected to the GSI listed in joint statements.



Events such as 'Build a peaceful China and safeguard international peace', hosted by China's foreign affairs and public security ministries in 2021, are a means by which Chinese party-state norms on crime prevention become more widespread. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema's state visit to China in September 2023 resulted in a joint statement that demonstrated an advance in the kind of language used around the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind and related initiatives. In addition to the usual warm words referring to cooperation, the document included more concrete measures that each side would take to implement the GSI and China's other global initiatives, vowing to 'intensify high-level exchanges between their military forces, strengthen cooperation in the areas of personnel training, combating transnational crimes [打击跨国犯罪], military medicine, equipment and technologies'.³⁹ Such statements suggest that the buy-in of second countries to the GSI security framework (including the approach to combating transnational crime) is taking place through bilateral agreements.

Although the precise terms and agreements vary, there is a broad trend that can be evidenced in various other agreements between China and second countries, such as the Solomon Islands and Syria. For example, a document leaked to Anna Powles, a senior lecturer in security studies at Massey University in New Zealand (discussed here by academic David Arase) and thought to be the text of a 2022 security cooperation agreement between China and the Solomon Islands included a provision for 'Chinese police, armed police and military units to be sent to the islands to assist [Prime Minister] Sogavare to maintain social order'.⁴⁰ Similarly, during President Bashar al-Assad's visit to China in September 2023, the Syrian president signalled that 'Syria is willing to work with China to implement the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative'.⁴¹

Dissemination of the GSI, the wider governance system and related approaches to global issues are not limited to bilateral relationships, however. Although the success of such approaches is not yet clear, there have been efforts to promote the values of the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind through events and relationships with multilateral organizations. One example of particular pertinence to global crime prevention efforts is the 'Build a peaceful China and safeguard international peace' event jointly hosted by China's foreign affairs and public security ministries in July 2021. The event was attended by '153 representatives from 108 embassies and 8 international organizations in China, including ambassadors from 25 countries such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Singapore, South Africa, Cameroon, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, and Costa Rica'.⁴² At the event, then vice minister Wang Xiaohong explained how China's public security authorities 'have always followed the leadership of the [Communist Party of China], upheld the people-centered approach, and kept to the socialist path of promoting peace and security with Chinese characteristics'.⁴³ Speaking directly

to the potential shifts that this report investigates, the official account of the event also makes clear that China is now ready to work with other countries to 'build a community of universal security for all' and that other countries 'stand ready to further enhance exchanges with China, and strengthen all-round cooperation with China in law enforcement and security, [and the] fight against transnational organized crimes, [and to develop] police assistance, and personnel training'.⁴⁴

Advocacy for the GSI approach is also evident in various other engagements. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks at the Middle East Security Forum reflected the state focus and traditional security concerns element of the GSI (rather than the transnational crime prevention element):

In April this year, President Xi Jinping put forward the Global Security Initiative, which gives clear answers to the question of our times about how countries can achieve common security and is of great significance to promoting peace and stability in the Middle East. China is willing to take the implementation of the GSI as an opportunity to work with Middle East countries and the international community to jointly promote the construction of a new security architecture in the Middle East.⁴⁵

In terms of organizations, one finds the GSI approach (and the concept of a Community of Common Destiny for Mankind within which it is embedded) present throughout the Chinese party-state's global engagement. The CCP's international mouthpiece, the *Global Times*, for example, reports that the concept of a global community of shared future 'has been included in the UN General Assembly resolutions for six consecutive years'.⁴⁶ Likewise, coverage in the *People's Daily* of a meeting between Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong and INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock stated that 'China is willing to work with INTERPOL to promote the implementation of the global security initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping and make greater contributions to maintaining global security and development'.⁴⁷ From the Chinese party-state's perspective, engagement of this nature with international organizations constitutes an important part of the transmission of its concepts, including the GSI.

Global vision, global scrutiny

As leaders in Beijing step up promotion of Chinese party-state approaches to global governance (including crime prevention) on the international stage, the broader impact necessarily generates greater scrutiny, particularly of the relationship between ideals espoused and the actions observed.

While the strengths and weaknesses of the existing international order (in the field of crime prevention and beyond) have been continually debated for decades, the Chinese party-state model remains understudied and undertheorized.⁴⁸ Initial analysis suggests that there are various points at which party-state rhetoric and practice on international crime prevention appear to be at odds. This is particularly clear in areas connected to respect for national sovereignty, a vital element of the GSI. Long-standing issues include, for example, China's alleged misuse of INTERPOL Red Notices to target dissidents.⁴⁹ New challenges include the well-publicized controversy when it emerged that 'Chinese Community and Police Cooperation Centres' (known also by various other names, all typically within a network of 'Overseas Chinese Service Centres') were active in various countries around the world.⁵⁰ Researchers have claimed that, in addition to routine activities such as providing services for Chinese tourists, these centres were in some cases intertwined with Chinese party-state organs of influence overseas, and in the case of Spain, for example, were 'actively working with Chinese police to engage in covert and illegal policing operations'.⁵¹ Other examples of party-state activities that appear to

contradict the rhetoric of the country's pronouncements on global governance include overseas-based groups tied to influence activities that claim to abide by both Chinese constitution and local laws (presumably a problem where the two are in conflict).⁵² Finally, China's growing capacity to train the police forces of other nations could lead to clashes over policing methods in future, both within individual polities and at the level of international cooperation. In September 2023, for example, the party-state introduced draft legislation that would allow police to 'collect biological information in cases involving minor offences, which would vastly expand a controversial practice currently used only in investigations related to terrorism, drugs and other serious crimes'.⁵³

The new proposals for global crime prevention therefore require the same type of scrutiny applied to the existing system, especially in terms of the scope for novel risk. This requirement is particularly acute since domestic scrutiny (both judicial and journalistic) and accountability is undoubtedly less established in China than in countries most associated with the existing order. From the perspective of crime prevention, the Asia-Pacific region represents the ideal arena to explore these themes further. This region not only sits on the frontier of Chinese party-state global governance efforts, but contains a well-known feature to those working in international crime prevention in the region – the presence of prominent criminal networks ostensibly linked to China. The cases of two notorious criminals and their networks in the Asia-Pacific region, Wan Kuok-koi and Zhao Wei in particular, offer an opportunity to survey potential hazards. This appraisal also offers the opportunity for a corrective. Much of the existing research on such networks overlooks important features that will be crucial in any attempt to disrupt them and mitigate the damage they cause. Some degree of this oversight is the result of mirroring (discussed above) where one's own values and assumptions shape one's engagement with the object of study. Application of knowledge relating to state objectives and state structures acquired through study of countries associated with the liberal international order, for example, may not be as useful in analysis of the Chinese party-state.



Like all major powers that project power abroad, Beijing will face greater scrutiny as its international presence grows, including in its attitude to policing. © Giulia Marchi/Bloomberg via Getty Images

OLD FRIENDS, NEW RISKS

On 27 September 2023, China's *Global Times* reported on the country's renewed efforts to 'crack down on telecom fraud and transnational crimes'.⁵⁴ This followed the publication by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) of a 'Regional Cooperation Roadmap to Address Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking in Persons Associated with Casinos and Scam Operations in Southeast Asia'. There had also been high-level discussions between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China.⁵⁵ The issue of telecom fraud broaches an important ongoing trend in criminality across Asia. The past decade has seen a dramatic rise in the number of crime hubs in South East Asia, most often located in the borderlands of weak rule-of-law polities, and associated with many types of serious crime, including modern slavery, sexual exploitation, cybercrime, narcotics trafficking and wildlife trafficking.⁵⁶ The victims of these crimes come from a number of different countries, but particularly from countries in the region, including China. Chinese party-state efforts to develop cooperation with the countries where these crime hubs are located, as featured in the UNODC report, appear very much in line with the rhetoric of the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind, and there have also been efforts by China to clamp down on some criminal activity in some locations. However, when we apply the type of investigative research approach that is not typically permitted within a more illiberal setting, it produces findings that speak to a wider, more complex form of Chinese party-state engagement with the networks in question. These findings suggest that further analysis of Chinese party-state activity vis-à-vis criminality in the region and beyond is necessary, and that there are potentially significant gaps between rhetoric and behaviour that engender significant hazards.



The capitol building, Palau. Criminal networks revealed through case study research reach the Pacific island nation, a territory of strategic importance to Beijing.
© Florian Holub/Getty Images

Wan Kuok-koi

Wan Kuok-koi (尹國駒), also known as 'Broken Tooth', is widely reported to be one of Asia's most notorious gangsters.⁵⁷ Born into poverty in Macau in 1955, he endured a violent childhood before rising to lead the Macau chapter of the 14K triad, 'the second-largest triad in Hong Kong with an estimated 20,000 members and 30 loosely affiliated subgroups'.⁵⁸ He made his fortune in Macau's wildly corrupt casino industry, but his criminal activities eventually caught up with him when he was arrested in 1998 and charged with loan sharking and money laundering, for which he would go on to serve 14 years in prison.⁵⁹

Wan apparently left prison a changed man, with his legal team declaring that he simply sought a quiet life post-incarceration.⁶⁰ In the years that followed, his image seemed to morph from gangster to patriotic businessperson. He founded the World Hongmen History and Culture Association in Cambodia, the Hong Kong-based Dongmei Group and the Palau China Hung-Mun (or 'Hongmen') Cultural Association, all of which would later be referenced in the 2020 US sanctions targeting him. The US Treasury claimed that the 14K triad was utilizing Wan's World Hongmen History and Culture Association in an effort to legitimize itself. Wan's venture in Cambodia involved the launch of a dubious cryptocurrency, while his vice president at the Cambodian Hongmen association was Malaysian Nicky Liow Soon Hee (廖顺喜). Liow was implicated in 'a string of e-commerce apps and cryptocurrency trading platforms under the name "Yunbao", but he was eventually arrested in April 2021, along with two of his brothers, for links to a Macau criminal syndicate and running a call center-based investment scam operation'.⁶¹ He was charged with 26 counts of money laundering and pleaded not guilty to all the charges. The case is ongoing.⁶² The individual most commonly identified as Wan's protégé is Macau's 'junket king', Alvin Chau (周焯華).⁶³ Like Wan, Chau is associated with the 14K triad, although he denies affiliation. He too was eventually imprisoned for his activities, receiving an 18-year sentence in 2023 for 162 charges of fraud, illegal gambling and criminal association.⁶⁴

It has been widely reported that Wan's criminal activity did not diminish after his release from prison, and eventually led to efforts by Malaysian authorities to track him down, as well as the US imposing sanctions for a raft of crimes, including trafficking in drugs and people, illegal gambling and racketeering.⁶⁵ Wan's illicit activities, particularly gambling, are linked to hubs in Cambodia and Myanmar that are also associated with the type of cybercrime that China is clamping down on, according to the *Global Times* article from September 2023.⁶⁶

Despite Wan's clear involvement in serious crime, research presented in this report suggests proximity between Wan and an organization belonging to the official realm of the Chinese party-state. Wan made a rare trip to Beijing in 2021 to receive a special award for his 'patriotic' work as a businessperson (see image below).⁶⁷ The group responsible for bestowing this award upon him was the Hailian Working Committee (海联工委). Hailian sits under the China Association for Science and Technology (中国科学技术协会, often referred to simply as 中国科协), an organization officially part of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and therefore very much part of China's united front system (discussed below).⁶⁸ Hailian's position in the party-state landscape implies a significant amount about its activity and objectives.

An important part of the CCP's defence of its own position is its management of the interface where party and non-party elements interact. This interface encompasses both domestic and international spheres. Most recently, international united front work activities have included efforts to co-opt the Chinese diaspora (as well as suppressing potential for dissent), and efforts to co-opt foreigners 'to support and promote the CCP's foreign policy goals, and to provide access to strategic information and technical knowledge'.⁶⁹



Left: Zheng Shuai of Hailian Working Committee presents an award to Wan Kuok-koi, widely known as one of Asia's most notorious criminals. Centre: Zheng with his official consultant at Hailian, Lu Bin. Right: Lu Bin in his People's Liberation Army National Defence University role. Photos: Evidence reproduced from NetEase, China Times and Tsinghua University. Further details may be found in the notes.⁷⁰

United front activity differs depending on local conditions but the objective of entrenching and strengthening the CCP remains. To those familiar with China's political structure, the organizational structure in which Hailian sits suggests not simply that it is within the Chinese party-state's bureaucracy, but that it is part of the Chinese party-state's international engagement apparatus.

Photographs from a meeting held by Hailian in January 2021 concerning its establishment in the Philippines, for example, show not only the head of the group, Zheng Shuai (郑帅), who was pictured with Wan at the award ceremony in 2021 (see image on the left), but also a number of relatively senior Chinese party-state officials, including from the military and defence apparatus. There are also representatives from various identified united front system groups, further strengthening the impression that Hailian plays a role in Chinese party-state activities abroad.⁷¹ Participants at the Philippine meeting were urged to 'contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', very much in the language of the CCP. At the meeting, the group's head can be seen sitting next to his official consultant at Hailian, Lu Bin (吕彬) (see centre image). Lu Bin is a former officer of the People's Liberation Army National Defence University,⁷² and is depicted in military uniform in the image on the right.⁷³ The significance of this connection is further emphasized by Lu's publicly acknowledged senior role within Hailian.

Among a plethora of approaches that China employs when engaging the region, the award given to Wan by Hailian in Beijing is, at the very minimum, a sign of the Chinese party-state's ambivalence towards Wan's widely acknowledged criminality and activities. Clearly, party-state association with a person like Wan stands in stark contrast to the type of rhetoric being deployed as part of the proposed Community of Common Destiny for Mankind form of governance, particularly the GSI. The potential motivation for such an association is discussed below.

Zhao Wei

Another example of a South East Asian crime hub, in keeping with the weak rule-of-law borderland politics referred to above, is the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) in the Lao province of Bokeo.⁷⁴ In fact, the GTSEZ has been described as the worst of these hubs and is rife with serious criminal activity, with the director of a corporate intelligence consultancy claiming that 'human

trafficking, methamphetamine production and wildlife smuggling barely scratch the surface.⁷⁵ The zone is 'run on Beijing time, signs are in Mandarin, the majority of workers are Chinese nationals and Chinese yuan is the main currency used'.⁷⁶ According to the *South China Morning Post*, the zone also contains the kind of cyber fraud activity that is raising concerns globally.⁷⁷

The GTSEZ was inaugurated in 2009, but the direct path to its creation began two years earlier when a leasing agreement for the land that would become the GTSEZ was reached, with the aim of attracting foreign investment and increasing tourism. Hong Kong-registered Kings Romans Group (Lao name: ດອກງິ້ວຄຳ/Dok Ngiew Kham; Chinese name: 金木棉国际(香港)有限公司 in Hong Kong; 深圳市金木棉投资发展有限公司 in Shenzhen) signed the agreement with the Lao government for the 99-year lease of a stretch of land overlooking the Mekong River with over a hundred square kilometres of farmland.⁷⁸ The president of Kings Romans and chairperson of the GTSEZ is Zhao Wei (赵伟 also known as Chio Wai), who, like Wan, made a fortune investing in casinos in Macau. After the turn of the millennium, Zhao ventured to Myanmar, where he established his own casino in Mong La, a city more recently associated with online gambling.⁷⁹

Zhao and his network, including the Kings Romans Group, have been sanctioned by the US as a 'transnational criminal organization' for alleged involvement in 'drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, bribery, and wildlife trafficking'.⁸⁰ Beyond this official designation by the US, researchers visiting the site have documented 'illegal activities, including drugs, prostitution, money laundering and the trade in endangered species', while noting that 'casinos can be used to launder money made through illegal businesses, including illegal wildlife trade'.⁸¹

As in the case of Wan Kuok-koi, reporting on Zhao Wei's extensive criminal connections is widespread.⁸² Likewise, careful examination of the background and networks associated with Zhao and his companies appear to reveal links to the Chinese party-state. Significantly, the tone of both Chinese party-state media coverage of Zhao and Zhao's discussion of the party-state is broadly positive. For example, a 2019 Chinese-language media report on Zhao, published after his sanctioning by the US, describes him as an 'overseas Chinese businessman of national integrity'.⁸³ The article goes on to claim that he is 'laying the foundation for China's economic development and Belt and Road Initiative'.⁸⁴ Zhao's links to the party-state are numerous, involving businesses, officials and chambers of commerce.

Chinese chambers of commerce play an important role in the party-state's activity abroad, and in view of their precise activity and objectives, it could be argued that they are chambers of commerce in name only. Australian academic and expert on Chinese influence Gerry Groot has outlined the ways in which these organizations are better seen in the context of the Chinese party-state as extensions of the CCP's overseas influence work. Writing in a brief, Groot says:

Chambers of commerce provide a useful face for dealings with foreigners, while associations allow the UFWD [United Front Work Department] to discretely manage more directly political aspects. Considering the recent fate of the State Administration of Religious Affairs—a government ministry that was absorbed wholesale into the UFWD—we might perhaps expect to see the same occur to the chambers of commerce.⁸⁵

Larry Diamond and Orville Schell have drawn a similar conclusion from their wider investigation into Chinese influence in America, finding that "united front" organizations, such as the Chinese Enterprise Association and other Chinese chambers of commerce, are almost always linked both to the United Front Work Department and to the Ministry of Commerce'.⁸⁶

澳門東盟國際商會
Macao ASEAN International Chamber of Commerce

愛東盟 愛中國 愛澳門
Love ASEAN, Love China, Love Macao

中文 | English

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第二屆組織架構

榮譽主席: (按姓氏筆劃排序)

王彬成	何玉棠	何猷龍	吳在權	呂強光	李強	周焯華	林金城	林英樂	林道德	紀曉波
高開賢	崔世平	崔世昌	梁少培	梁仲虬	許文昂	許世元	許健康	陳明旭	陳雄財	陳德啟
賀一誠	廖澤雲	鄭鴻河	黎振強	鍾小健	顏延齡	譚伯業				

名譽主席: (按姓氏筆劃排序)

古潤金	伍志偉	成典前	朱豔	何汝源	何海明	吳士芳	吳光曙	吳聯盟	呂聯勝
呂聯發	李友智	李祥立	李睿恆	冼志揚	周同來	林南	林秀通	林卓華	林啟明
林景光	邱庭彪	施少峰	施仲舒	施利亞	施維炳	胡家儀	徐華民	徐靜慧	馬志成
馬志毅	馬浩文	高永快	張志民	曹忠東	畢明	莊文才	莫啟明	許文曲	許明宏
許國璇	陳少雄	陳永建	陳季敏	陳忠治	陳龍炎	陸曦	陸松林	勞灼榮	曾文雅
曾旭明	曾嘉炫	楊錦江	葉紹文	趙五慶	劉永年	劉朝盛	蔣朝陽	鄧盛堂	賴初偉
霍志釗	薛奇	謝路生	羅盛宗	譚立武	蘇香玫				

理監事名錄: (排名不分先後)

創會主席: 劉蕪良 陳明金 趙偉

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The website of the Macau ASEAN Chamber of Commerce lists Zhao Wei (name circled) as a founding chair. A role in an institution of this nature is neither a conventional nor neutral link back to the Chinese party-state. Photo: Evidence reproduced from the Macau ASEAN Chamber of Commerce website. Further details may be found in the notes.⁸⁷

The GTSEZ's online Chinese profile includes a reference to Zhao as a 'founding chair' (創會主席) of the Macau ASEAN Chamber of Commerce, an important connection not only because of the link between Zhao and the Chinese party-state, but because this is a prominent position in an organization associated with Chinese party-state influence activity abroad.⁸⁸ Such positions are typically only granted to people trusted by the CCP. The link in this case is confirmed in the records of prominent individuals associated with the chamber on its website.⁸⁹ A role in an institution of this nature is neither a conventional nor neutral link back to the Chinese party-state and so once again raises the prospect of gaps between governance models advocated and the policies pursued by China.

Staying with chambers of commerce, the Chinese consulate in Laos published a report in 2016 marking the one-year anniversary of the establishment of a Laos-China Fujian Chamber of Commerce (老挝中国福建商会), located inside the GTSEZ (see image below).⁹⁰ The fact that such a group is based in this location represents a remarkable degree of proximity between the Chinese party-state and someone who is widely reported to be complicit in serious criminal activities. Zhao attended the celebration along with various officials, both Chinese and Lao. Although there have been instances where the BRI has been mentioned without permission by people seeking to feign official endorsement, the presence of Consul General Li Baoguang (黎宝光) at this event and the report on the consulate's official website show that the BRI is in fact being endorsed here. To be clear about the significance of this event, it brings together Zhao, alleged to be one of the region's most prominent criminals, and Li Baoguang, a Chinese party-state representative acting in his official capacity, under the banner of the BRI, one of China's most important foreign policy programmes. According to the consulate's report, Zhao featured prominently in the programme. He made a congratulatory speech at the event in which he vowed to uphold the chamber's founding principles (loving one's country and one's hometown), and to promote friendship between China and Laos.⁹¹



Delegates celebrate the one-year anniversary of the establishment of the Laos-China Fujian Chamber of Commerce in 2016. Zhao (wearing a green jacket and light trousers) sits to Consul General Li Baoguang's left. The banners include references to the Belt and Road Initiative. Photo: Evidence reproduced from the website of the Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Luang Prabang. Further details provided in the notes.⁹²

Building on the findings and their implications in South East Asia, investigation into the backgrounds of the people and organizations connected to the GTSEZ shows how the nexus between crime and geopolitics extends beyond the immediate region. Expanding the networks encountered in examples such as the two explored here is vital in ascertaining a truer picture of the forces at play and the risks produced by networks that bind together a sovereign state and those widely acknowledged to be criminal actors. Tracing the early investors in Zhao's GTSEZ is particularly fruitful in terms of understanding the wider networks in which the venture is embedded, as well as the questions such networks could raise in other polities where these networks reach. The group Beijing Joseph Investment (BJI) (北京约瑟投资有限公司), for example, was already involved in the GTSEZ in 2010 at the latest, a critical period in the zone's formation.⁹³ The 2010 record of BJI's involvement in the GTSEZ on its own website mentions cooperation between BJI, Zhao Wei and the Kings Romans Group, and a third entity, Henan Linde International Logistics Group (河南林德国际物流集团).⁹⁴ This agreement is framed as a means for Chinese enterprises to explore overseas markets. Further coverage of BJI frames the use of private capital by Chinese private enterprises (including Zhao's Kings Romans Group) as a means of supporting Laos, and positions it in relation to the then recently launched ASEAN-China Free Trade Area.⁹⁵

Additional research reveals a notable juxtaposition between BJI's role as a seemingly important facilitator in the formation of the GTSEZ and the group's links in China itself. The founder of BJI is Joseph Chen (whose Chinese name is recorded in various instances as 陈九霖 or 陈久霖). Research into Chen's background for this report reveals not only links to the Chinese party-state, but also what appears to be a deep enmeshment within the united front system itself. A conversation with Chen appeared on a Beijing united front website in 2021, dedicated to the CCP's centenary that year. The interview reveals that Chen is the secretary-general of the financial group of non-party intellectuals of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中央统战部党外知识分子建言献策专家组财金组秘书长).⁹⁶ It is likely that this refers to the UFWD's fifth bureau, which is dedicated to ensuring that intellectuals not formally affiliated with the CCP remain amenable to the party and its aims. It therefore serves as a link between the party and civil society. The write-up of the conversation reports that in his role in helping to establish

a joint venture between British Petroleum and the China National Aviation Fuel Group (中国航油), Chen ensured the establishment of a Party Committee inside the joint venture (effectively a CCP organization – the presence of these organizations within companies would become mandatory in 2022).⁹⁷

Unsurprisingly, given Chen's united front links, there is also evidence of him, in effect, carrying the CCP's message abroad. In 2016, for example, he penned an article for the state media's *Global Times* that was highly critical of Singapore and its stance on navigation in the South China Sea, urging the city-state to clarify its position. In it, he warns Singapore that it could get burned if it mistakenly thinks that the US can counterbalance China.⁹⁸ Chen's apparent links to the higher echelons of Chinese party-state power are also supported by his VIP attendance at China's 70th anniversary celebrations in Tiananmen Square in 2019. Images from the event show Chen in attendance and the ID-style card used to gain access.⁹⁹ The information on the card includes his name, his status as a distinguished guest, and the Chinese name of his group Beijing Joseph Investment. Chen told press at the event that he was 'grateful to the Communist Party and wishes the great motherland ever more prosperity!' ('感恩共产党, 祝福伟大祖国更加繁荣昌盛!').

To draw this particular thread on Zhao Wei to a close, and to show how these networks associated with the GTSEZ extend beyond the region, it is useful to return to the Henan Linde International Logistics Group mentioned earlier in relation to the cooperation agreement between Joseph Chen's BJI and Zhao Wei's Kings Romans Group in 2010. Research into the group's background shows that it acquired Germany's Parchim airport in 2007. Just over a decade after the Parchim purchase, the Party Secretary of Xuchang in Henan, Wu Guoding, announced a deal between Xuchang municipal government, the Linde Group and Parchim airport to create a 'Xuchang-Parchim Free Trade Zone'.¹⁰⁰ This fascinating connection to the acquisition of a European airport by an entity linked to the type of networks explored here suggests other potentially noteworthy findings.

The case studies of Zhao and Wan raise questions about the proximity between prominent persons and entities linked to the party-state, and sanctioned persons who have been widely accused of criminal activity. It suggests a potential gap between the theory espoused in policy, such as the GSI, and the realpolitik practised on the ground.

Emerging issues: where ideals meet interests

In light of what has been set out above, it is useful to explore the logic behind these connections. In this instance, a case could be made that the linkages offer concrete geopolitical advantages to China's elite political class. These networks and the types of perceptions they generate are crucial considerations both for those looking in and for China's elite political class itself – as with all such proposals, perceived hypocrisy has the potential to undermine reception. A key difference between the system of governance advocated by China and the existing liberal international order is not the hypocrisy and self-interest that are present in varying degrees in both, but rather the capacity to criticize both the systems themselves and the chief interest groups affiliated with them. While US behaviour in the international realm is subject to fierce criticism domestically (for example, in various forms of media), the domestic political configuration of the Chinese party-state is such that the regime cultivates a 'monopoly on truth'.¹⁰¹ This fact alone will be a source of friction as China promotes its own model of global governance, particularly in the area of crime prevention, where abuse of power has typically been a facilitator of crime and civil society resilience an inhibitor.

In the case of Wan and Zhao, the reason for the Chinese party-state's apparent indifference to the criminality of such figures appears most likely to be geopolitical gain. There is complexity in this picture. In various instances, there is a genuine motivation for the Chinese party-state to address cybercrime by cracking down on syndicates associated with such activities, not least because of the potential impact on stability when Chinese citizens fall victim to scams.¹⁰² However, the cost-benefit calculus appears to be different in the cases of Wan Kuok-koi and Zhao Wei, leaving space for interpretation that links the previously discussed networks that tie in the criminal networks with Beijing, to the geopolitical benefits accrued from such networks. Wan's activities in the region include, for example, establishing a presence in Palau, a territory of strategic importance to Beijing. Wan's connections there include, most notably, former president Thomas 'Tommy' Remengesau Jr. A 2018 Chinese-language report records a meeting between Wan and Remengesau on 6 October that year, and declares that Palau will unconditionally support the establishment of Wan's Hongmen SEZ. The tone and register of the report closely match the official language employed by the CCP, referring to 'cross-strait reunification' and 'the rejuvenation of the motherland'. It also contains images taken at the event showing the two together.¹⁰³ Closer inspection of networks in this case reveals that Wan's outreach to the Palauan elite was supported by a pre-existing Chinese network in Palau, much of which possesses its own links to Beijing.

Tian Hang, head of the Palau Overseas Chinese Federation, and his deputy, Wang Guodan, appear to have played a significant role in facilitating Wan's access to Palauan elites. These two members of the Chinese community hold prominent roles bridging the Pacific Island nation with China. Tian is a Palau-based hotelier who boasts an extensive network in the nation's political circles. He has professional ties to the minister for human resources, culture, tourism and development, Ngirai Tmetuchl, and to former Palauan president Johnson Toribiong.¹⁰⁴ According to a report by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), it was Tian's deputy, Wang Guodan, who introduced Wan Kuok-koi to Remengesau.¹⁰⁵ The OCCRP report mentions that both Tian and Wang were guests at a celebration of 70 years of CCP rule in Beijing in 2019, part of the same round of celebrations that this report has shown included BJI founder Joseph Chen. To provide context to this invitation, another overseas Chinese national invited to the same event was Christine Lee, who travelled to Beijing from the UK. Just over two years later, British security services identified Lee as an overseas agent of the Chinese party-state, although Lee has denied these claims.¹⁰⁶

Zhao Wei also appears to have engaged in overseas activities that can broadly be seen as advancing Chinese strategic interests. As well as links to Chinese party-state organizations, Zhao has cultivated connections to the Lao political elite in the process of securing and establishing the GTSEZ.¹⁰⁷ Zhao's project boasts an impressive stream of visits by senior Lao politicians to the zone, some of whom go on to sit on the management board of the GTSEZ.¹⁰⁸ Zhao's network includes Somsavat Lengsavad, former deputy prime minister of Laos, and the two have become



Former deputy prime minister of Laos, Somsavat Lengsavad, is connected to Zhao Wei's Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. © Hoang Dinh Nam/AFP via Getty Images

good friends.¹⁰⁹ Returning to the geopolitical element of this equation, Lengsavad is recognized as the Lao driving force behind the Laos–China railway mega-project, a vital piece of infrastructure in China's wider regional strategy and flagship BRI project.¹¹⁰ For all of this, if the cost-benefit calculus associated with Wan and Zhao's activity changes, one or both could lose any protection they have. Uncovering the relationship between elements of the Chinese party-state and persons who are accused of being two of Asia's most prominent criminals may at first seem confounding. In fact, there is a historical precedent. As the end of British rule beckoned in Hong Kong, Beijing was acutely aware of the dangers posed by the presence of the various triads in the territory. Former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping is reported to have commented that the triads had 'many good people' within their ranks, while Minister of Public Security Tao Siji declared in 1993 that the CCP should unite with the triads provided they are patriotic.¹¹¹ There are also well-known examples of state–crime links beyond China involving other countries, typically through intelligence or security organs, such as the widely acknowledged historical anti-communist activities of the US that involved criminals.¹¹² The examples explored in this report, however, may signal a new phase in the instrumentalization of criminal actors.

The spectre of geocriminality

The case study examples demonstrate noteworthy proximity between party-state institutions and widely recognized criminal networks, as well as scope for state instrumentalization of such networks. The examples share several important characteristics that, taken together, distinguish them from the majority of other comparable instances in other polities and other eras. First, the scale of the entities involved is vast, with Zhao Wei's GTSEZ, for example, resembling a city-state. Second, apparent links to the upper echelons of various national elites raise questions about the extent to which the party-state instrumentalizes criminality to achieve broader geopolitical aims, beyond more immediate intelligence and security objectives associated with historical state instrumentalization of criminality evidenced in other polities. Finally, the prevailing domestic conditions of the Chinese party-state represent a critical distinction, at least when compared to polities with a largely independent press and judiciary. The positioning of media, for example, as a reflection of the CCP's political desires and guardian of its authority, means that party-state utilization of criminal networks faces little prospective domestic opposition or scrutiny.¹¹³ This context is useful in understanding the potential trajectories of China's approach to crime and crime prevention as its influence becomes more widespread globally (as discussed in the first half of this report), but a better understanding of the wider phenomenon also raises further questions. Such is the scope for instrumentalization of criminality by a state actor in the examples explored that we ought to consider the very terminology used to describe this activity. The findings in this report and beyond suggest there is a case to be made to employ the term 'geocriminality' when grappling with this evolving relationship.¹¹⁴

The entry of geocriminality into the international relations lexicon should be considered in the context of terms such as geoeconomics. The precise meaning of the term 'geoeconomics' is the subject of debate, but in terms of foreign policy strategy, most specialists working on related topics would not venture far from the idea that it 'refers to the application of economic means of power by states so as to realize strategic objectives', with growing recent scrutiny on this activity through the prism of interference in other countries' affairs.¹¹⁵ Further evidence of state-crime proximity and apparent scope for instrumentalization in the Chinese party-state example come from cases spanning a wide range of activities and arrangements, from opaque deals in South East Asian borderland criminal hotspots that Beijing would eventually have to reverse course on, to a heady mix of gambling, money laundering



Kings Romans Casino, which sits inside the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, is a notable hub of criminality in the region, with illicit activities including drug trafficking and money laundering. © Pongmanat Tasiri/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

and united front groups that reach into the local political sphere in Australia.¹¹⁶ The most pronounced activity appears to take place in Taiwan.¹¹⁷ One illustrative example involves Taiwanese politician Chang An-lo (张安乐), founder of the pro-Beijing and pro-unification Chinese Unity Promotion Party. Chang is associated with Taiwan's largest triad, the Bamboo Union, and has widely acknowledged links to organized crime.¹¹⁸ After serving jail time in the US for drug trafficking-related offences, Chang was deported to Taiwan in 1995. He fled in 1996 following a crackdown on crime, finding refuge across the Taiwan Strait in Shenzhen, China, where he was reportedly recruited by the CCP.¹¹⁹ He returned to Taiwan in 2013, continuing his political unification work, reflected in his political party's name. In 2018, Chang was once again arrested, and the offices of his political party raided, for allegedly accepting 'money over the years from China to organize pro-China rallies in Taiwan and engage in violent activities against students and pro-Taiwan independence groups'.¹²⁰ These examples, like the applicability of the term geocriminality itself, would benefit from additional research and discussion.¹²¹ It would also be useful to test geocriminality as a concept not only in the case of other states beyond the Chinese example, but also beyond statehood itself, considering the term in the context of regions, political entities and organizations.



CONCLUSION: SAME BED, DIFFERENT DREAMS?

China's push to shape global governance could have an impact on wider efforts to fight transnational organized crime. The relevant elements of the CCP's vision for global governance, particularly the GSI, contain proposals considered desirable by specific audiences (most typically national elites critical of existing international norms) but also familiar pitfalls, such as gaps between rhetoric and reality, not untypical of political groups that face little scrutiny. Individual features of the model tend to privilege existing national elites and inhibit accountability, thus posing a different kind of challenge to any shortcomings of the existing model of international order. At the same time, the perceived failings of the existing liberal order (with accusations including Western bias and inability to prevent economic turmoil) have evidently made China's model more attractive to some, despite its weaknesses.

It is imperative that those working in the sphere of global crime prevention keep abreast of shifts in the landscape. A wholesale transformation of the existing model remains unlikely, but the impact of China's proposals may be felt as evolution not revolution. Change is taking place not primarily in the principal theatres of liberal multilateralism but in a variety of less considered sites: through China's bilateral relations; in meetings between foreign elites and ostensibly non-state Chinese actors; in territories with weak rule of law conditions; in ill-defined borderlands; and in China-led crime prevention training sessions. The nature of Chinese party-state engagement and the changes it is designed to bring about in the realm of crime prevention are comparable and related to similar efforts around foreign and international law.¹²² There, as here, one must take great care not to analyze aspects of the Chinese party-state through the lens of existing norms, nor to understand seemingly familiar terms as they are understood in a liberal democratic system.

The Chinese expression 'same bed, different dreams' (同床异梦), used to describe closeness in the absence of effective communication, can encompass this scenario of global partners with ostensibly the same goals but different points of reference. The incompatibility between existing and proposed orders may emerge as a major theme of global governance in the coming years, including in crime prevention. Greater clarity about the potential challenges ahead will benefit all those involved in crime prevention, China included. It is always desirable for the international community to be aware of shifts in the landscape – and those communicated here are no exception.



Beijing's increasing presence in global crime prevention efforts has created complex questions for policymakers around the world. © Giulia Marchi/Bloomberg via Getty Images

The findings of this report relate not to nation, culture or ethnicity, but to the universal theme of accountability, particularly the accountability of elite groups. It is no revelation that the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind challenges existing norms; it is, after all, an alternative to the liberal international order. Looking beyond the implications of China's proposed model for the global crime prevention landscape to the model itself, there are obvious hazards generated by the agency granted to national elites. The logic running through the proposals is that if one has the power to define crime, then one has the power to eliminate it. But this formulation does not bode well for the victims of crime, especially those who fall victim to those in power or connected to those in power. For all the worthy rhetoric of China's proposals, they contain opacity and scope for abuse, as revealed in the realities on the ground.

This report is intended as an initial assessment – all new proposals with the capacity to shape global crime prevention merit scrutiny, those considered here included. A suitable response would include further research into the more impervious networks where the Chinese party-state and criminality appear to meet. Similarly, there are two distinct fields of knowledge that would benefit from greater interaction: research on triad-like groups from a criminological perspective, and more conventional international relations research into the Chinese party-state and its activities abroad. There should also be more clear-headedness about engagement with China in the realm of crime prevention, given the type of model that the country's political elite is advocating and its domestic approach to criminal matters. It should serve as a reminder of the importance of those elements of the liberal international order that hold power to account, be they major organizations or individual actors. Criticism of all players should continue, but with clear acknowledgements. As the field of international crime prevention evolves, it is important to bear in mind that China combines a strong rule-by-law system over which the CPP resides, with a size and scale that, unlike superficially similar authoritarian states, affords it a degree of ability to shift global norms.

NOTES

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