NSI's Jelena Vidojević in conversation with Kaiser Kuo

Kaiser Kuo

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This exclusive interview is part of **Missing Voices: Critical Thinking in Times of Polycrisis**, a discussion series presented by the New South Institute (NSI).

The series seeks to offer a necessary and fresh contribution to current global debates on the future of the global order, bringing together diverse voices and perspectives that have often been marginalised, oversimplified, or silenced altogether. Here, NSI's Jelena Vidojević is in conversation with Kaiser Kuo.

Q **Jelena Vidojević: Over the past two decades, we have witnessed profound transformations, and it seems that existing conceptual frameworks are too narrow to fully capture their scope. The structural weaknesses, and the hypocrisy, of the liberal international order have been exposed, generating a complex mix of reactions: hope in some parts of the world, and pronounced anxiety in others.**

There is a growing consensus that we can no longer speak simply of a "crisis" of the liberal international order, that it is, in fact, beyond crisis, perhaps even dead. What remains less clear, however, are the underlying causes of this transformation, as well as what might follow. Much of the diagnosis and prognosis depend on the vantage point from which the world is observed, as well as on the degree of intellectual honesty applied.

In your recent *essay*, you argue that China stands at the very centre of this crisis, as both cause and a mirror. Could you elaborate on this argument?

A **Kaiser Kuo:** I find the framing of China as both cause and mirror genuinely useful, though I'd qualify both terms.

China is part of the cause, certainly, but only part. The liberal international order was already undermining itself through its own contradictions: selective enforcement of norms, repeated military overreach, the financial crisis,

widening inequality, and a growing gap between its universalist rhetoric and actual practice. China didn't create those weaknesses. What it did was expose them and accelerate their consequences. Most obviously, China's rise challenged some core assumptions of the post-Cold War moment. There was a fairly deep confidence in the West that integration into global markets and institutions would, over time, pull China in a liberal direction politically as well as economically. That didn't happen. Instead, China became richer, more technologically capable, more militarily formidable, and more institutionally confident without converging in the way many had expected. That forced a reckoning not only with China, but with the assumptions that had shaped Western expectations in the first place.

It forced a reconsideration of things many Americans, especially, had come to treat almost as axiomatic: that markets and political liberalisation naturally go together, that first-rate innovation depends on free expression in the Western sense, that industrial policy is a distortion rather than a driver of development, that technological modernity would necessarily weaken rather than strengthen state power. China's trajectory did not disprove every liberal claim, but it did make them look far less universal, and far more historically contingent, than many had assumed.

But the "mirror" part is, to my mind, the more interesting half.

What China's rise has done is reflect something back to the West, which, above all, is its own susceptibility to civilisational thinking. One of the striking developments of the last several years has been the revival of civilisational language in Western discourse: talk of "the West" not just as a geopolitical bloc but as a civilisational inheritance that must be defended, consolidated, even spiritually recovered. China did not invent this mode of thinking, of course. But Chinese intellectuals and officials have spent decades elaborating a particularly coherent version of it: the idea of the civilisational state, the appeal to deep historical continuity, the claim that political legitimacy rests in part on embodying an ancient and distinctive cultural tradition. What is striking is how readily similar moves now appear elsewhere.

That is why I called it a trap. Once politics is framed in civilisational terms, a certain logic tends to follow. You stress continuity. You flatten internal diversity. You define yourself against external threat. You begin to treat disagreement within the supposed civilisation as a kind of betrayal, and difference between civilisations as something deeper and less negotiable than ordinary political conflict. That pattern is visible in China, but increasingly elsewhere too.

The sharpest formulation of the problem comes from Chenchen Zhang, whose work in many ways inspired

the essay: civilisational discourse asserts difference internationally while erasing difference internally. It presents itself as pluralism at the global level - many civilisations, many paths - while demanding homogeneity within each purported civilisation. So, it is not pluralism in any deep sense. It is a way of scaling up homogeneity.

That, to me, is why China matters so much to this discussion. Not simply because its rise helped unsettle the liberal order, but because the Western response to that rise has often revealed a disturbing tendency to imitate the very logic it claims to resist.

Q **Jelena Vidojević: China's achievements over the past few decades have been not only remarkable but, as you pointed out, they "oblige us to reconsider what we know about modernity, state capacity, and forms of political legitimacy." As China's global influence continues to grow, do you foresee an effort to promote, or perhaps even impose, a Chinese model of development internationally? What kind of global power will China become?**

A **Kaiser Kuo:** This is one of the central questions surrounding China's rise, and I think it has to be answered with some modesty. I'm not sure anyone really knows, including many people inside China's own system.

What I can say is that the evidence for an active effort to export a "Chinese model" in any explicit, ideological sense is still fairly thin. China has unquestionably expanded the range of what other countries can imagine as possible. It has shown that large-scale industrialisation, poverty reduction, technological upgrading, and state-led development can happen outside the framework long associated with the Washington Consensus. That example matters, especially for governments in the developing world. But that is not the same thing as a missionary project.

For the most part, Chinese officials have described their own path as highly specific to China's circumstances: its scale, its history, its institutional inheritance, its revolutionary legacy, and its long civilisational self-understanding. That line is repeated so often in official discourse that one can dismiss it as formula. But I think it also reflects something real. The Chinese system has generally been presented not as a universal template, but as the product of a very particular national experience.

That, in turn, marks a real contrast with the American tradition, which has often treated its own political values as broadly universal, or at least as the horizon toward which other societies ought eventually to

move. China's self-presentation is different. It is more particularist than universalist. Beijing often seems to want recognition, respect, and room for its own path more than it wants wholesale ideological conversion abroad.

That said, influence does not require doctrine. The Belt and Road Initiative, the spread of Chinese platforms and standards, the export of surveillance and telecommunications technologies, and the appeal of Chinese development experience to political elites elsewhere all carry implications, even when they are not wrapped in a fully articulated ideology. In that sense, China may shape the world less by persuading others to become like China than by normalising a wider range of non-Western and non-liberal developmental possibilities.

As for what kind of global power China will become, I think that remains genuinely unsettled. It could continue on its present course: regionally dominant, globally consequential, but selective in its willingness to assume the burdens of full-spectrum leadership. It could also become more ambitious over time, especially if it concludes that the existing international order is too hostile or too constraining to accommodate its interests. But I would resist the temptation to force a definitive answer now. Too much depends on contingencies we cannot yet see clearly, including the evolution of China's domestic politics, its economic performance, and the behaviour of the United States and its allies.

Q **Jelena Vidojević: Are there any concrete visions, or even blueprints, emerging from the Global South regarding the future world order, beyond the familiar calls for more inclusive and less hypocritical international institutions? BRICS[1] , and to some extent the SCO[2] , are often described as "the vanguard of the World Majority," with the potential, though not yet fully realised, to shape rules, set standards, implement policies, and offer institutional alternatives to Western-dominated frameworks. How significant are BRICS+ and the SCO for China's strategic ambitions, and how meaningful are they in practice for the broader Global South?**

A **Kaiser Kuo:** I would say not yet, at least not in the sense of a fully formed and internally coherent blueprint. But it would be a mistake to stop there, because something more substantial than rhetoric is beginning to take shape.

For decades, the language of the Global South has centred on demands for a less hypocritical and more inclusive international order. What is different now is that some of the institutional underpinnings of an alternative are slowly being built. They remain partial, uneven, and full of contradictions, but they are no

[1] Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa were the founder members of this entity. They have been joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in 2024/2025.

[2] Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

longer merely aspirational.

The BRICS summit in Kazan in 2024 is a good example. It produced BRICS Pay, intended to facilitate transactions between central banks outside the SWIFT system, along with new mechanisms to support local-currency settlement. Much of this still runs, in practical terms, through China's financial system, which means that any talk of post-Western plurality has to be tempered by the reality of Chinese centrality. The Kazan declaration also called for a feasibility study for BRICS Clear, a cross-border settlement and depository structure that could eventually reduce dependence on dollar conversion. None of this is fully operational yet. But it does suggest that the conversation has moved beyond complaint and into the realm of institutional design.

The SCO's Tianjin summit in September 2025 pushed things a bit further. The decision to establish an SCO Development Bank was especially notable, not least because it marked the removal of a longstanding Russian obstacle to an initiative Beijing had wanted for years. Xi Jinping's announcement of a new Global Governance Initiative, together with the launch of six China-SCO cooperation platforms in areas like energy, the digital economy, AI, and higher education, also pointed in the same direction. These are still early-stage arrangements. But they are more than symbolic gestures.

So, I would distinguish between vision and blueprint. I do think one can now speak of emerging visions with some operational content behind them. What I do not yet see is a settled and coherent alternative order with widely agreed rules, internal hierarchy, and a stable normative core.

As for how meaningful BRICS and the SCO are for China's strategic ambitions, the answer is: very. These forums matter to Beijing not only as instruments of prestige, but as platforms through which it can help shape institutions, standards, and flows of capital in ways that reduce dependence on Western-dominated systems. They also allow China to present itself as the principal advocate of a more plural international order, even where its own preferences are clearly doing much of the structuring.

For the broader Global South, the picture is more mixed. These institutions do create real openings. They broaden financing options, reduce reliance on Western-controlled channels, and give member states additional leverage. That is not trivial. At the same time, it would be naive to assume that Chinese strategic interests and those of the Global South are naturally aligned. Many states are participating not because they are signing on to a Chinese project in any deep ideological sense, but because they want optionality.

[4] Also known as the Berlin West Africa Conference, this was a meeting of European powers in 1884-1885 to discuss and formalise their claims to territory in Africa.

[5] Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

That is where the internal tensions become harder to ignore. BRICS and the SCO bring together democracies, autocracies, monarchies, and states with sharply divergent strategic interests. India, in particular, has made it clear that participation does not imply deference. So while these institutions are often discussed under the banner of multipolarity, the actual pattern is messier: a widening field of institutional alternatives, yes, but with China often serving as the main gravitational force within it.

There is an irony here. The language of sovereign equality and non-interference resonates strongly across the Global South, especially in countries with long memories of colonial intervention. But the actual organisational logic of these groupings does not always sit comfortably with that rhetoric. The promise is multipolarity; the practice often looks more asymmetrical.

What has accelerated this process, moreover, is not only Chinese initiative but Western conduct. The expansive use of sanctions, the weaponisation of dollar clearing, the evident double standards in Western foreign policy, and the broader coercive turn in U.S. economic statecraft have all strengthened the case for building alternatives. In that sense, many countries are not simply being drawn into institutions China prefers, they are also responding to a system that has become more punitive, less predictable, and less legitimate in their eyes.

So my answer would be this: we are not yet looking at a finished post-Western order, nor at a worked-out Global South blueprint for one. What we are seeing is the gradual construction of a parallel infrastructure, financial, diplomatic, and institutional, that gives more states greater room for manoeuvre. Whether that eventually amounts to a genuine reordering of world politics remains to be seen. But it is already too consequential to dismiss as posturing or as little more than a shared anti-Western mood.

Q **Jelena Vidojević: What role do you think Africa will play in an emerging post-Western international order? If we consider how the continent is currently positioned within the geopolitical thinking of leading BRICS countries, there seems to be limited cause for optimism. Despite the positive rhetoric surrounding South–South cooperation, Africa often appears to remain on the margins of strategic decision-making. This raises a broader question: are emerging powers likely to break with historical patterns of marginalisation and exploitation, or merely reproduce them in new forms? At the same time, the increasing prominence of civilisational imaginaries in the intellectual and policy circles**

[6] International Monetary Fund

[7] The name most commonly used for the World Bank published report “Accelerated Development in SubSaharan Africa: A plan for Africa”, written by Eliot Berg in 1981.

of countries such as Russia, China, India, and Turkey points to a possible reordering of global hierarchies. In such a framework, the international system may come to be structured around distinctions between so-called "civilisational states" and more conventional nation-states. If this is the case, where would that leave African states within the emerging order?

A **Kaiser Kuo:** Your question usefully exposes a real gap in my essay. The *Civilization Trap* traces civilisational discourse mainly through its Chinese, Western, and to some extent Indian and Russian forms, but it does not directly confront where Africa would sit in the sort of order that various versions of this discourse imagine. Once one does ask the question, the implications are clarifying and not especially reassuring.

On the broader geopolitical issue, though, I am somewhat less pessimistic than your question suggests. Africa enters an emerging multipolar order with certain structural advantages that are easy to underestimate. Fifty-four UN member states represent considerable diplomatic weight. No major power is unaware of that. China, in particular, has invested heavily in cultivating African support in multilateral settings, and that courtship creates room for manoeuvre that African governments are increasingly capable of using. The continent's resource endowment matters enormously as well: cobalt, lithium, manganese, rare earths, and other inputs central to the energy transition and advanced manufacturing, are precisely the sorts of things that all major industrial powers now need. And then there is demography. At a moment when much of the developed world is aging, Africa's youthful and urbanising populations give it a significance that will only grow.

None of that precludes new forms of dependency or exploitation. The concern that emerging powers may reproduce older patterns in altered form is entirely legitimate. But one feature of intensifying great-power competition is that it creates options. African states are not dealing with a single external centre of gravity; they are being courted by several. That does not guarantee good outcomes, but it does create bargaining space. Much will depend on whether African governments can convert that space into durable advantage rather than slipping into a new patron-client logic under different branding.

It is when one turns to the civilisational-state framework that my optimism recedes. The trouble is built into the logic of the framework itself. If political legitimacy is said to rest on deep civilisational continuity, on the state as custodian and embodiment of a long historical tradition, then some states enter the conversation with a built-in advantage. China, India, Russia, Turkey, Iran each can make, with varying degrees of plausibility, a claim of that kind. Africa, by contrast, contains immense civilisational depth, but it does not

map neatly onto the state-centred narratives that civilisationist discourse tends to privilege. A few African states might try to formulate such claims, but none can do so in quite the way that Beijing can speak in the name of Chinese civilisation, or Delhi in the name of an Indian one.

That matters because it suggests that civilisational discourse, whatever its anti-Western aspirations, risks reproducing hierarchy in another register. It does not simply distinguish among states by power or wealth. It distinguishes among them by presumed depth, inheritance, and historical stature. Within such a scheme, African states are in danger of being acknowledged as sovereign yet treated as somehow less foundational to the world's civilisational architecture. That is a familiar move, even if the vocabulary is new.

I would expect many African intellectuals and policymakers to see this quite clearly. One reason civilisational rhetoric may meet resistance in Africa is that it carries an unmistakable echo of older hierarchical ways of ordering the world. It may present itself as pluralist, even anti-imperial, but it can still end up sorting polities into those seen as bearers of great civilisations and those cast, implicitly, as belonging to a lesser tier.

That is why I think Africa's place in an emerging post-Western order will not be settled in any simple way. On the one hand, the continent's diplomatic weight, strategic resources, and demographic significance give it more leverage than is often acknowledged. On the other hand, if civilisational-state discourse becomes one of the dominant idioms of international legitimacy, Africa may find itself disadvantaged by the very terms of the conversation.

So, I would not say Africa is destined to remain on the margins. But neither would I assume that a post-Western order will, by itself, be more egalitarian. Emerging powers may well challenge Western dominance without abandoning hierarchy. They may reject one grammar of superiority only to install another. In that respect, Africa's role may be one of the key tests of whether a genuinely more plural order is coming into being, or whether the world is simply being reorganised around new centres of prestige and power.

Q **Jelena Vidojević: Over the past few decades, China has emerged as a major strategic and economic partner for many African countries. Yet its growing engagement with the continent has sparked a polarising and often heated debate. China's presence in Africa is frequently accompanied by sensationalism and speculation, sometimes even paranoia, with critics portraying it as a new form of "imperialism" or framing it as part of a "new scramble for Africa." How do you assess these narratives,**

and what is your perspective on the nature and implications of China's engagement with African states?

A **Kaiser Kuo:** Few debates in the China-watching world have generated more heat relative to light than this one. I have followed it closely for years, though I should say that much of what I understand about it comes from the work of Eric Olander and Cobus van Staden, whose China-Global South Project has done more than perhaps any other English-language outlet to bring serious, on-the-ground reporting to a subject too often discussed in sweeping abstractions by people far removed from the places in question.

The "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative deserves especially careful scrutiny, if only because it has proved so durable despite the weakness of the evidence behind it. African countries owe roughly $708 billion in external debt, and only a relatively modest share of that, around 11.5 percent, is owed to China. Private bondholders hold a larger portion, often on less forgiving terms. Even Hambantota, the case so often invoked as the archetype of Chinese predation, looks on closer inspection much more like a story of Sri Lankan political misjudgement and debt distress than a clean example of Beijing deliberately seizing strategic assets. Yet despite repeated debunkings, and despite the absence of a broader pattern of Chinese asset seizure, the debt-trap idea remains remarkably resilient. That resilience tells us something. The story has been useful to people for reasons that go beyond its empirical adequacy.

The charge of "neocolonialism" also needs to be handled with more care than it usually receives. Here I find Olander and van Staden persuasive. To describe China's often problematic behaviour in Africa as "colonial" risks flattening history in a way that is both analytically sloppy and morally evasive. European colonialism in Africa was not simply a matter of outside influence, asymmetrical exchange, or infrastructure built to serve extractive ends. It was a centuries-long system of conquest, dispossession, racial domination, cultural destruction, and economic distortion on an enormous scale. To use the same term for Chinese lending, construction, and trade practices is, at the very least, to blur distinctions that ought to remain sharp.

That said, the corrective to caricature is not romanticism. It would be just as mistaken to treat China as a wholly benign or disinterested partner. One reason China has made such headway in Africa is that it has been willing to finance and build things, roads, ports, railways, power infrastructure, that many Western donors and lenders either would not finance or would finance only under a more onerous layer of conditionality. And China has generally engaged African states as counterparts in negotiation rather than as wards in need of tutelage. However imperfectly realised, that has often been experienced as more respectful of agency than the paternalism that has so often accompanied Western aid and governance discourse.

This is one reason I find parts of the debt-trap critique so unsatisfying. It often treats African governments as passive objects of manipulation, as though they neither understand the terms being offered nor possess the capacity to pursue their own interests. Many African interlocutors have pushed back on exactly this point. There is a peculiar condescension in some Western commentary on the subject: a readiness to assume that if African governments enter into deals with China, they must either have been duped or coerced.

But one of van Staden's most important points, in my view, is that even where China has offered genuine alternatives, it has not fundamentally altered Africa's place in the world economy. It has expanded room for manoeuvre. It has created options. In some cases, it has improved infrastructure and increased bargaining power. But much of the underlying structure remains familiar: raw materials flowing outward, higher-value manufactured goods flowing inward, and transport and logistics networks too often oriented toward extraction rather than broad-based domestic transformation.

There is a real irony here. China's rhetoric in Africa draws heavily, and often effectively, on its own history of humiliation at the hands of imperial powers. That shared anti-colonial language has been one of Beijing's great diplomatic advantages on the continent. But if, in practice, China ends up reproducing even a softened version of the extractive relationships it denounces - resources out, manufactured goods in, infrastructure designed primarily to facilitate that exchange - then that would mark a profound contradiction. Whether Beijing is reckoning honestly with that possibility remains, I think, an open question.

What I would resist, in any case, is the tendency to force the relationship into a morality play. China is not simply a new imperial master in Africa, nor is it some uniquely virtuous South-South partner. It is a powerful state pursuing its interests but doing so in a way that differs in important respects from the older Western pattern and that has often created real opportunities for African states, even while also generating new dependencies and familiar asymmetries.

The most encouraging thing, perhaps, is that African publics often seem more clear-eyed than the geopolitical commentary surrounding them. Afrobarometer polling has for years shown that views of China and the United States across much of Africa are often closer, and in some cases more favourable to both, than the rhetoric of great-power competition would lead one to expect. That suggests a pragmatism too often missing from outside analysis. The real question is whether African states can turn that pragmatism into bargaining power substantial enough to shape the terms of engagement, rather than merely choosing among external powers on offer.