

With nearly half the world's population and a quarter of global GDP, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has matured into a platform that challenges the very grammar of international politics, offering a vision that stands in stark contrast to the West's increasingly fenced-off, crisis-ridden order.

At its recent summit in Tianjin — the largest in the bloc's history — President Xi Jinping described Asia and Europe as “a garden of civilisations” flourishing in mutual prosperity.

His call for pluralism and shared universalism could not be more distinct from the insular worldview of the decaying Western elite. Just three years ago, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell laid bare this mentality when he declared that “Europe is a garden” and “the rest of the world is a jungle”.

Borrell's metaphor echoed the old imperial creed: wealth at the centre, insecurity at the periphery. “The gardeners have to go to the jungle. Europeans have to be much more engaged with the rest of the world. Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means,” he warned, not-so-ironically repeating the rationale behind centuries of Western interventions.

Europe's Renaissance, after all, was financed by the gold and silver of the Americas. Its Industrial Revolution by the forced labour and resources of Asia and Africa. The neat lawns of Europe's “garden” were fertilised with blood.

By contrast, Xi's counterpoint at Tianjin invoked bridges rather than walls. He called for shared platforms in energy transition, green industry, higher education, artificial intelligence, and even space exploration.

“The vast land of Asia and Europe, a cradle of ancient civilisations where the earliest exchanges between the East and the West took place, has been a driving force behind human progress,” Xi noted. SCO members should “jointly cultivate a garden of civilisations in which all cultures flourish in prosperity and harmony through mutual enlightenment,” he added.

Unlike NATO, which expands through exclusion and militarisation, the SCO grows through inclusion, now embracing nearly half of humanity. With no headquarters or standing army, it remains a forum where governments openly champion negotiation over force, even in disputes.

Xi's Global Governance Initiative

The Tianjin summit also revealed the substance behind Xi's Global Governance Initiative (GGI). Warning that "Global governance has reached a new crossroads," he urged resistance to "hegemonism and power politics".

Drawing on the founding of the UN in 1945, Xi outlined five principles: sovereign equality, strict adherence to international law, true multilateralism, people-centred development, and practical coordination.

"All countries, regardless of size, strength and wealth, are equal participants, decision-makers and beneficiaries in global governance," he said, rejecting the "house rules of a few".

He stressed that "international law and rules should be applied equally and uniformly. There should be no double standards," while decisions must emerge from "extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefit."

Moreover, Xi repeatedly invokes class-neutral language ("all countries", "common interests") and opposes every form of unilateralism or racism.

The summit's communique likewise declared itself on the "right side of history and on the side of fairness and justice," signalling continuity with the anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century.

Concrete measures followed. Leaders approved the long-discussed SCO Development Bank to finance infrastructure and regional projects, alongside six cooperation platforms: three China–SCO platforms in energy, green industry, and the digital economy and three centres for tech innovation, higher education and vocational training.

Planned projects include expanding renewable capacity by “tens of gigawatts” within five years, establishing an AI application centre, and sharing Chinese satellite navigation and lunar research with SCO partners.

Beijing pledged ¥2 billion in grants, ¥10 billion in loans, and training programmes across the Global South. Xi also announced ten new “Luban workshops” to train workers in renewable energy, rail, and automotive technologies.

Meanwhile, the SCO’s economic weight is rising. In 2024, bilateral China-SCO trade reached \$512.4 billion – nearly \$900 billion if observers and dialogue partners are included – signalling a Eurasian supply chain increasingly shielded from Western sanctions and protectionism.

Collapse of Western universality

It would be safe to argue that the SCO’s agenda embodies what might be called “dialectical anti-imperialism”: addressing the contradictions of capitalist globalisation not through ethnic or civilisational rhetoric, but through multilateral cooperation.

The communique endorsed the WTO-based system, condemned protectionism, and rejected unilateral sanctions, calling instead for an “open world economy”.

China, for its part, is pitching itself as a redistributor of global surplus, not as an extractor. Its state-owned firms build infrastructure in Africa and Latin America, relying on local labour rather than forced relocations or land grabs. Its vast trade surpluses are recycled into global finance, with \$750–800 billion in US Treasuries effectively subsidising Western consumption – the opposite of imperial rent-extraction.

For these reasons, China fails to meet the classic criteria of imperialism: no territorial conquest, no puppet regimes, no concentration of global capital in a financial oligarchy. Scholars argue that as long as state ownership and planning remain central, China will not evolve into an imperial power. Instead, it functions as a sui generis state-led economy, prioritising domestic stability and development over foreign domination.

China thus fails the core criteria of an imperialist state: it does not concentrate global capital in a financial oligarchy, divide the world for super-profits, or subjugate clients. With dominant public ownership, state banks and planning, its foreign policy pressures differ from capitalist empires. Beijing's domestic focus on employment and stability reduces incentives for conquest, consistent with its stated rejection of hegemony.

The writing is on the wall: a "garden" fenced against a "jungle" encodes hierarchy, siege and paranoia, and in doing so writes its own obituary. The Shanghai Spirit has demonstrated that the contest between two models of order — one rooted in imperial nostalgia, the other in post-colonial possibility — is no longer abstract.

In a cruel irony, Europe's elites, tethered to an increasingly irrelevant transatlantic alliance, risk missing the emergence of a Eurasian order. The second line of Ukraine's anthem — "fate still smiles on us, fellow Ukrainians" — now rings painfully hollow. One could say fate no longer smiles on Europe itself.

A continent once imagined as history's vanguard has become a stage for decline, disorientation and crisis. Europe, the clockmaker of modernity, no longer keeps time. All the powers of "old Europe", in holy alliance with their transatlantic partners, fight to preserve the illusion that their waning order still defines the future.

However, history is moving elsewhere. The arrogance of Western elites collides with a simple fact: another civilisation, with deeper roots and broader horizons, has tabled a new proposal for world order. China's Global Civilisation Initiative directly negates Eurocentric universalism. It imagines plurality without domination, cooperation without hierarchy — principles resonating across the Global South.

As Karl Marx once wondered, would Europe's reactionaries, reaching the Great Wall, find inscribed: "République chinoise — Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité"? The irony today is stark: while Europe retreats behind walls and fears of invasion, it is China, along with its partners, that invokes

fraternity, equality and liberty not as abstractions, but as the material basis of multipolar development.

The spectre haunting the world is no longer communism in its narrow European sense, but the collapse of Western universality itself. Against it rises a vision rooted in the long memory of civilisations, where the future is co-authored across continents.

The substance behind the “garden vs jungle” talk is alarming. Western powers routinely wage economic warfare, with the US and EU imposing unilateral sanctions on dozens of countries, often in defiance of the UN. A Lancet study found such sanctions “as deadly as war itself”.

Today, the US alone has sanctioned roughly 40% of all nations, cutting off trade and finance without UN approval.

Economists Francisco Rodríguez, Silvio Rendón, and Mark Weisbrot estimate that sanctions kill around 500,000 civilians annually. As they note, while commonly called “international sanctions,” “there is nothing international about them” – they are unilateral acts serving powerful states, not global law or decency.

In practice, China’s “dialectical” anti-imperialism prioritises shared material interests over identity politics.

The Tianjin Summit showcased pragmatic projects – a development bank, linked power grids, clean technology – with a narrative of civilisation serving diversity and cooperation. Civilisations were treated not as camps in conflict but as communities working on equal footing.

As Foreign Minister Wang Yi summarised, the SCO will “uphold the Shanghai Spirit... [and] make more contributions to building a multipolar world”.