

The Global Trust Deficit and China's Rebuilding Proposal

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The international order and global system are undergoing complex and profound changes nowadays. Unparalleled transformations in the world, the speed at which they happen, and the course of history are unfolding in unprecedented ways, ushering in a new period of turbulence and transition.

Geopolitical and geo-economic competition among major powers is intensifying; global economic growth remains sluggish; crises and conflicts continue to emerge; and both regional and global peace and security are repeatedly challenged.

Global disorders are increasingly threatening the survival and well-being of humanity, while the tasks of global governance are becoming more daunting. Countries' perceptions, understandings, and attitudes toward each other are constantly in flux, and consensus on the current international order, world peace and security, global economic development, and even the future of humanity is gradually weakening.

Confusion and uncertainty are on the rise, and the trust deficit has become a key issue confronting the international community. Trust influences mutual perceptions, attitudes, and actions between individuals and among nations. It shapes international relations and the ways countries interact, and it is especially crucial for advancing international cooperation.

In recent years, the growing trust deficit has led to a decline in global consensus, disrupted cooperative mechanisms, and blocked international

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coordination efforts, placing the world at risk of division and fragmentation.

It is imperative that the international community rebuild trust. This is one of the reasons the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in 2024 adopted "Rebuilding Trust" as its theme, reflecting the global community's deep concern and anxiety over the widening trust deficit.

Participants at the meeting voiced widespread concerns that a lack of trust would exacerbate uncertainty in economic growth and increase risks to peace and development. At this critical moment, countries urgently need to reflect on the root causes of the trust deficit and identify a clear course to restore trust. Looking ahead, as a responsible major country, China can continue to contribute its wisdom and strength to the global trust-rebuilding effort through its ideas, proposals, and actions.

Reasons for the Global Trust Deficit

The world today is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century. The balance of international power is shifting, science and technology are advancing rapidly, and competing global ideologies are colliding.

Among these challenges, a defining feature of current international politics is the growing trust deficit. Trust, as a stable belief, involves the assumption that another actor can be relied upon and forms the basis for reciprocal cooperation. It plays a crucial role in upholding shared social values and maintaining stability. Trust is also reflected in confidence in expectations—the belief that other actors will likewise do the right thing and in good faith.¹

Mutual trust among nations is the foundation for stable and cooperative international relationships and is essential to addressing shared global challenges. The success or failure of international cooperation often hinges on the level of trust between parties. However, building and maintaining trust is far from easy. The inherently anarchic nature of international politics

1 J. Ruzicka and V. C. Keating, "Going Global: Trust Research and International Relations," *Journal of Trust Research*, No.5, 2015, pp.8-26.

makes it difficult for countries to fully trust each other's motives and actions. A single crisis, incident, or misstep can damage trust and may even lead to its complete collapse.

Today, several key factors are contributing to the global trust deficit.

Changes in the global balance of power have led countries to reassess their perceptions of themselves, each other, and the world, thereby weakening mutual trust.

After World War II, the distribution of national power shaped the international system and fostered relatively stable perceptions and attitudes among countries. At the end of the war, Western countries led by the United States accounted for over 70% of global economic output. The post-war international order was dominated by Western powers across political, economic, military, and security domains. The G7 largely steered the global economy, and three of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council were members of NATO.

Following the end of the Cold War, multipolarity gained momentum, and a group of developing countries, most notably China, began rising collectively. The gap between developed and developing countries narrowed. In 2008, emerging markets and developing economies accounted for 51.3% of global GDP, surpassing developed economies for the first time. By 2022, their share had further increased to 58.3%, 16.6 percentage points higher than that of developed economies.² In recent years, emerging markets and developing countries have contributed about 80% of global economic growth, with China alone contributing roughly 30% for many consecutive years. The long-standing dominance of developed countries in global affairs has undergone a historic shift.

Whether in the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, or current crises such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Western powers like the United States can no longer respond

² Huanyu Ping, "Working Together to Promote an Equitable and Orderly Multipolar World," *People's Daily*, March 26, 2024, p.3.

effectively on their own. CIA Director William Burns recently acknowledged that the U.S. no longer holds an unchallenged position of dominance in the world.³

A key reason for this shift is the rise in comprehensive national power among other countries, both U.S. rivals and its allies. At the same time, the global economic center of gravity is also shifting. For much of the post-war period, Europe and North America were at the heart of the world economy, with the Atlantic Rim serving as the principal center of economic activity. However, by 2019, Asia accounted for 34% of global economic output, while the U.S. and EU together accounted for 31%. Some scholars have pointed out that the Europe-Atlantic-centered economic order of the 19th and 20th centuries is being replaced by an Asia-centered economic landscape in the 21st century.⁴

Alongside shifts in national strength and regional power dynamics, countries' perceptions and attitudes toward themselves, each other, the international system, the global landscape, and the prevailing order are also undergoing significant changes. These evolving perceptions have a direct impact on national behavior.

On one hand, developed countries are striving to preserve their traditional privileged position within the international system and global order. On the other hand, they have increasingly exhibited unease, anxiety, and even a sense of panic over the rapid rise of nations like China, prompting them to adopt a series of preventive and containment strategies to protect their hegemonic privileges. The United States' designation of China as its "only competitor" is a telling example.

These shifts in major power relations not only affect bilateral interactions but also have a profound influence on the global order and on countries' confidence and perceptions of that order. At the same time, the

3 W. J. Burns, "Spycraft and Statecraft Transforming the CIA for an Age of Competition," *Foreign Affairs*, No.2, 2024.

4 "Foreign Media: The Center of Gravity of the World Economy Is Shifting Toward Asia," April 16, 2021, <https://m.gmw.cn/baijia/2021-04/16/1302236059.html>.

“Global South,” a collection of emerging markets and developing nations, has grown increasingly autonomous and independent. These countries now account for over 40% of global GDP,⁵ and are no longer willing to blindly align with or rely on a particular major power as they might have in the past. Instead, they are actively working to enhance their voice and influence in international affairs, striving to safeguard their own interests and assert their positions. The Global South is becoming an increasingly important force in shaping global multipolarity.

This wave of changes is reshaping national mindsets, perspectives, and strategic beliefs. Amid growing uncertainty, countries are becoming more assertive, suspicious, and even misinterpreting each other’s intentions, actions, and rhetoric. These dynamics are steadily eroding the foundation of mutual trust that once existed among nations.

The international order and system are undergoing profound changes, and growing uncertainties have weakened countries’ trust in the current international order and system.

The international order and system established after World War II primarily reflected the global landscape at that time. For decades, they played an important role in maintaining world peace and stability, promoting global economic development and prosperity, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, and advancing human progress as a whole.

However, in recent years, the international order has undergone deep and complex changes, with growing limitations and structural flaws gradually emerging. When discussing the international order, terms such as order transformation, order adjustment, instability, uncertainty, change, disorder, and even the collapse of the international order have become frequent keywords. This reflects widespread concern about the overall stability and future trajectory of the current international order.

5 “Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations,” March 7, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202403/t20240307_11255225.shtml.

It is generally believed that the so-called Western-led liberal order faces serious challenges, and confidence in the current international order's ability to maintain global peace and stability, as well as to effectively and timely address the challenges facing humanity, has waned. For example, after the outbreak of COVID-19, many scholars expressed concerns about the international order, arguing that the world order is undergoing change, and the pandemic both reflects and accelerates these deep and complex transformations, shifting the world's center of gravity from the West to the East.

Many scholars have examined the performance, leadership, dominance, and capability deficits of the United States, as well as changes in China-US relations and their impact on the world order. It is a prevailing view that the pandemic marked a turning point in the world order and that the United States, which had historically played a leading global role in resolving major global crises, has shown signs of decline in its pandemic response, effectively abandoning its leadership position. For example, scholars like Iver Neumann, Director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, argue that the inability of Western countries such as the US and Europe to effectively respond to the pandemic may mark the beginning of the end of the Western liberal order.⁶

An important aspect of trust is confidence in others' capabilities and willingness. It is now clear that countries are no longer optimistic about the current international order's effectiveness and the system's capabilities.

Intensifying major-power competition and a lack of mutual trust among great powers have weakened global confidence not only in these powers themselves but also in international organizations and the rules that govern the global system.

Great power relations are a key factor shaping the international order and global landscape. In recent years, the balance of power, distribution

⁶ I. B. Neumann, O. J. Sending, "Will the Corona Virus Be the Deathblow of the World Order," *Norwegian Daily Aftenposten*, March 23, 2020.

of influence, and alignment of interests among major powers have all undergone significant changes. These relations have increasingly been framed through a realist lens, marked by a strong return of traditional geopolitical and security concerns. The complexity of geopolitical and geoeconomic relationships has deepened and spilled over into areas such as technology, society, and culture. As a result, major power dynamics are continuously reshaping the global agenda in the process.

Since 2016, China–U.S. relations have changed dramatically. The United States has designated China as “the only country with the capability to challenge the current international system” and has worked with allies to contain and suppress China on multiple fronts. Bilateral relations between China and the U.S. have reached historic lows across political, economic, technological, and societal domains, with increasing politicization and securitization of bilateral issues. Meanwhile, the United States and Russia have long been locked in a state of strategic rivalry and confrontation. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, mutual trust between the two countries has plummeted to historic lows, and bilateral relations have deteriorated further. In its 2022 National Security Strategy, the U.S. labeled Russia as a “highly dangerous state,” asserting that it poses a “persistent threat” to the international order and represents a “serious threat” to the United States.⁷

Tensions between Russia and the European Union have also entered a phase of full-scale confrontation. NATO, once described as being in a state of “brain death,” has been “revived” and is now considered the largest military alliance in history.

The intensification of competition and confrontation among major powers not only damaged bilateral relationships but also eroded the authority and credibility of international organizations and rules, thereby affecting the stability of the international order and global structure. International organizations and their associated rules and norms are the foundation for the functioning of the international order, and their legitimacy depends on

7 “The National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2022/10/BidenHarrisAdministrationsNationalSecurityStrategy10.2022.pdf>.

collective adherence and support, especially by major powers.

During Trump's first presidency, the United States withdrew from numerous international organizations, agreements, and treaties, including the Paris Agreement, the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Global Compact for Migration, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, and the Universal Postal Union. Although the Biden administration later rejoined several of these institutions, such as the Paris Agreement, the WHO, and UNESCO. However, these reversals have highlighted inconsistency and unpredictability, eroding the authority and seriousness of these international organizations and systems, weakening their resources, credibility, and governance capacity. It has also diminished the integrity of the rules and norms these institutions uphold.

Moreover, the U.S. is increasingly perceived as acting outside the very institutions and norms it once helped to establish, contributing to the weakening of bodies such as the World Trade Organization. Meanwhile, in the implementation of international rules, some countries frequently employ double standards, further eroding trust in the current international order. This has raised widespread questions such as: "Whose rules are these?", "Who must follow them?", and "What happens when the rules are broken?"

For instance, in response to the Ukraine crisis and the Israel–Palestine conflict, some Western countries have shown starkly different attitudes—explicitly condemning and criticizing Russia's actions while remaining silent or evasive regarding the Israel–Palestine conflict. Such selective application of norms and principles has further fueled skepticism and mistrust in the international community.

The growing inability to address global challenges has led to a governance deficit eroding countries' trust in the global system.

Despite rapid advances in science and technology, which have equipped humanity with an increasingly diverse set of tools, resources, and

technologies to solve problems, global challenges have continued to multiply in recent years, posing growing threats to human security and even survival. The global governance system has repeatedly fallen into states of dysfunction, ineffectiveness, and, at times, outright failure.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major test for the global governance system. When this severe global crisis emerged, the system partially failed in its initial response—international organizations acted slowly, multilateral mechanisms faltered, coordination among major powers proved difficult, and effective leadership was lacking.⁸ Most countries resorted to unilateral action, plunging global governance into disarray. The pandemic eventually spread to more than 200 countries and regions, becoming the most severe public health crisis faced by humanity since World War II, with repercussions extending beyond public health to global economics, politics, society, and culture.

Climate change is another global issue requiring urgent collective action. Since the 1980s, the scientific community has been working to address it, yet the problem has only worsened. The State of the Global Climate 2023 report by the World Meteorological Organization stated that 2023 was the hottest year on record. Every major climate indicator sounded alarms, like global heatwaves, floods, droughts, wildfires, and tropical cyclones, which affected millions of people and caused billions of dollars in economic losses.⁹ Climate change has led to a surge in extreme weather events, rising sea levels, changes in natural ecosystems, and reduced biodiversity, directly threatening the existence of some island nations.

At the same time, with technological progress and the expansion of human activities, new frontiers such as cyberspace, outer space, the deep sea, the polar regions, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology have become areas of global governance that lack adequate regulatory frameworks. In recent

8 Sun Jisheng, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Transformation of the Global Governance System,” *World Economics and Politics*, No.5, 2020.

9 Shang Kaiyuan, “Strengthening International Cooperation and Accelerating Climate Action,” *People’s Daily*, March 27, 2024, p.15.

years, countries have paid close attention to the development and governance of artificial intelligence. Generative AI has made it remarkably easy to create images, designs, and synthetic speech, blurring the line between fact and fiction. This has led to a surge in misinformation, which exacerbates misunderstandings and mistrust among nations.

Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, terms such as “information warfare,” “cognitive warfare,” “public opinion warfare,” “psychological warfare,” and “hybrid warfare” have gained traction on the international political agenda. The need to regulate AI use and address the ethical and technical implications it presents has become increasingly urgent. These emerging challenges have forced a global reckoning with the effectiveness and future of the current global governance system.

Sluggish global economic growth has eroded countries’ confidence in the future of the world economy.

Economic development is fundamental to improving living standards and advancing societal progress. The 2008 global financial crisis not only severely impacted developed countries in Europe and North America but also dealt a heavy blow to the global economic system, leading to widespread negative impacts on investment, trade, market confidence, consumption, employment, and even social stability. Many countries experienced prolonged economic stagnation and have yet to fully recover from the crisis’s shadow.

In recent years, changes in international politics have had profound implications for the global economy. After taking office in 2017, former U.S. President Donald Trump, under the banner of “America First,” pursued a policy of trade protectionism and sparked waves of anti-globalization and de-globalization sentiment. His administration launched a trade war with China to curb its rise, significantly disrupting global trade flows. Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. continued imposing tariff hikes on China and rallied its allies to reshape global industrial, supply, and value chains. U.S. policies advocating “decoupling” and “de-risking” from China, building so-called

“small yards with high fences,” and promoting “friend-shoring” have further destabilized international trade. Economists have warned that the trade war initiated by the U.S. has not only damaged bilateral U.S.-China trade but also undermined global trade norms, with ripple effects felt particularly strongly in many developing countries.¹⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the global economic downturn. Supply and industrial chains suffered severe disruption, while key sectors such as tourism and hospitality were hit particularly hard. The outbreak of the Ukraine crisis brought additional shock: Western sanctions on Russia caused volatility in global financial markets, and Europe was plunged into an energy crisis, with economic growth stagnating. The crisis also exacerbated the global food shortage. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, in 2022, approximately 205 million people across 45 countries or regions faced “crisis” or worsening levels of food security.¹¹

Meanwhile, the renewed conflict between Israel and Palestine has added to regional instability with global economic consequences. Attacks by Houthi forces on Red Sea trade routes have raised concerns about oil prices, shipping costs, and broader trade disruptions. This string of overlapping crises has cast a long shadow over the global economy.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global economic growth is projected to slow to 2.9% in 2024, down from 3.0% in 2023, and well below the historical average of 3.8% recorded from 2000 to 2019. On the opening day of the 2024 World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, the Chief Economists Outlook report revealed that many economists fear worsening geopolitical tensions could deepen economic fragmentation and widen the gap between the Global North and South.¹²

10 “News Investigation | What Has the U.S. Gained from the Trade War with China,” March 27, 2024, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/20240327/d6873eb15a0f43edb3419331b3c8ea3b/c.html>.

11 Feng Weijiang, “The International Impact One Year After the Escalation of the Ukraine Crisis,” *Guangming Daily*, February 22, 2023, p.12.

12 “Davos Forum Calls for Rebuilding Trust and Creating a Better Future Together,” January 19, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202401/content_6927170.htm.

Multifaceted Impacts from Global Trust Deficit

The intensifying global trust deficit is steadily undermining the international community's consensus on key issues. This has led to the breakdown of cooperative mechanisms, hampered joint actions among nations, and negatively affected perceptions and expectations for the future, adding further instability and uncertainty to today's world.

The growing trust deficit is continuously undermining global consensus. Reaching a basic consensus on key issues has long been a vital foundation for the continued development and progress of human society. However, this foundation is being steadily eroded, with visible impacts across many areas.

First, this decline is evident in perceptions and attitudes toward globalization. Since the end of the Cold War, globalization has accelerated, facilitating the free flow of information, capital, goods, technology, and people across the globe. It enabled the rise of new industries, new business models, and new engines of growth, successfully promoting global economic prosperity. From 1990 to 2010, the average annual growth rate of the world economy reached as high as 5.51%.¹³ The remarkable achievements of economic globalization were largely made possible by a broad consensus among countries regarding globalization, mutual trust, and a general agreement on the direction of joint efforts. Countries collaborated in both division of labor and cooperation, complementing each other's strengths in areas such as industrial planning, capital allocation, and resource distribution.

In recent years, however, consensus on the overall trajectory and direction of global development has fractured. Diverging views on many issues have emerged, directly influencing national decisions and specific actions. In 2017, after Donald Trump took office as U.S. President, the

13 Guo Jiping, "The Tide of the World Is Mighty and Unstoppable—On the Dangers of Certain Strategic Misjudgments by the United States (Part I)," *People's Daily*, June 14, 2019, p.1.

U.S. dramatically shifted its perception and attitude toward globalization, the international order, and international organizations, and translated these shifts into concrete actions. The U.S. adopted the notion that globalization was disadvantageous to itself, arguing that “globalization has made America suffer, while many countries—including its allies—benefit at America’s expense.” The U.S. administration withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and pushed to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Trump administration also launched trade wars targeting multiple countries, including not only China but also close U.S. allies such as the EU, as well as Canada, South Korea, and Japan.

Second, this divergence also appears in perspectives on global development and security. The U.S. shifted from embracing “globalism” to pursuing an “America First” agenda. As the world’s largest economy, changes in America’s attitude and behavior have had global repercussions. Similarly, European integration was long regarded as a model for regional integration. However, the Brexit referendum in 2016 dealt a major blow to European unity, weakening the EU’s overall political and economic influence.

This divide is even more pronounced in the realm of global security. Due to the lack of basic consensus on national and collective security, differences among countries have deepened, in some cases leading to armed conflict—the Ukraine crisis being a prime example. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has continued to expand eastward. Russia perceives this as a squeeze on its strategic space and a threat to its national security—an infringement on its interests. Russia justifies its actions in Ukraine as defensive, necessary for national defense, and protecting its sovereignty.¹⁴ In contrast, the U.S. and EU countries see Russia’s actions as aggressive and expansionist, characterizing the Ukraine crisis as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism, freedom and oppression, a rules-based order and one

14 “Putin’s 2024 State of the Nation Address (Full Text): Russia’s Goals for the Next Six Years,” March 4, 2024, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1792582893131645319&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

governed by brute force.¹⁵ Finland and Sweden felt increasingly threatened; Finland officially joined NATO in April 2023, and Sweden ended over 200 years of neutrality to join NATO in March 2024. These divergent narratives and conflicting perceptions have once again pushed Europe into a precarious state.

In the face of such widespread fragmentation, where is the world headed?

As President Xi Jinping emphasized in his keynote speech at the APEC CEO Summit: “The changes we are encountering in the world are unseen in a century. Changes create opportunities, but more often than not, they are accompanied by risks and challenges. Humanity has once again reached a crossroads. Which direction should we choose? Cooperation or confrontation? Openness or closing one’s door? Win-win progress or a zero-sum game? The interests of all countries and indeed, the future of humanity hinge on the choice we make.”¹⁶

At this critical juncture, countries urgently need to align with the tide of history and reach a consensus on major issues concerning peace, security, and development.

The trust deficit undermines the effectiveness of international institutions. The maintenance of international order relies on the proper functioning of international organizations and mechanisms, as well as the commitment of states to international rules and norms. For decades, the United Nations and its specialized agencies have played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability, addressing specific issues across various domains, and promoting human development. However, in recent years, international institutions have faced multiple challenges and slid into dysfunction on multiple occasions. Incidents of non-cooperation have become increasingly common, while the capacity, authority, and credibility

15 “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine,” March 26, 2022, <https://sg.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.

16 Xi Jinping, “Working Together for a Better Future—Keynote Speech at the APEC CEO Summit,” *People’s Daily*, November 18, 2018, p.2.

of international organizations have steadily declined.

In the global economy and trade arena, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been instrumental in promoting trade liberalization, economic globalization, and the formulation of trade rules. Yet in recent years, the WTO has encountered a host of difficulties. Since its inception, the Doha Round negotiations have faced significant roadblocks, particularly due to irreconcilable differences between developed and developing countries over agricultural policy. In July 2008, negotiations stalled after the United States refused to compromise on the special safeguard mechanism for agricultural products demanded by developing countries. Despite multiple rounds of talks, no breakthrough has been achieved, and the process has been shelved ever since.

The WTO Appellate Body, tasked with making final rulings on international trade disputes with binding force, fell into crisis in December 2019 when the selection of new members was blocked by a single country's veto. As a result, the body was left with only one judge, effectively paralyzing its operations—the first shutdown in the WTO's nearly 25-year history. This paralysis underscores the WTO's deep crisis and its growing inability to respond to the fragmentation of global trade or to mitigate the risks of economic divergence and turbulence. Commentators have attributed this impasse to dysfunctional decision-making, the inability to navigate complex multilateral interests in the Doha Round, a vacuum in leadership, and the shift of core members from rule-makers and advocates to disruptors and obstructers of the system.¹⁷

In the security domain, the United Nations has also struggled to fulfill its responsibilities. In the latest round of the Israel-Palestine conflict, by March 2024, more than 30,000 Palestinians had been killed and over 70,000 injured. On October 27, 2023, the 10th Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a draft resolution co-sponsored by 48 countries, including Jordan, calling for an immediate

17 Chen Ke, "Saving the World Trade Organization," December 13, 2021, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1719005901999738011&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

and sustained humanitarian truce. Nevertheless, Israel, with U.S. support, continued its large-scale military reprisals in Gaza. UN Secretary-General António Guterres invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter to urge the Security Council to intervene—the first time this clause had been used since 1989.

At a March 2024 UN General Assembly meeting on the use of veto powers, China expressed deep disappointment, noting that since the outbreak of the Gaza conflict nearly five months earlier, the United States had vetoed the Security Council's ceasefire resolutions successively four times. The Council's voting pattern clearly showed a broad consensus among most members in favor of a ceasefire, yet the U.S. repeatedly abused its veto power, undermining this consensus.¹⁸

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) should have played a leading global role. Instead, the United States announced its withdrawal from the WHO during the crisis, halting all financial contributions and refusing to shoulder its responsibilities as a major power. This decision pushed the WHO into a financial crisis, weakening its capacity to lead the global pandemic response.

The trust deficit undermines the advancement of international cooperation and coordinated actions. A lack of trust inevitably affects relations between countries and how they perceive one another, with the most direct consequence being the obstruction of unity and collaboration within the international community. Countries tend to prioritize their national interests, often delaying or even resisting necessary actions. This results in reduced international cooperation and increased risks of conflict and confrontation. Trust is continuously eroded and weakened by successive events, crises, and actions, leading to a deepening global trust deficit.

In today's world, countries are interconnected and interdependent like never before; no one can address major global challenges alone. Effectively

18 “Ambassador Geng Shuang’s Statement at the UN General Assembly Meeting on the Use of the Veto Power,” March 5, 2024, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zgylhg/jjalh/202404/t20240412_11280440.htm.

addressing risks such as economic downturns, debt crises, financial instability, inflation, climate emergencies, and worsening inequality depends heavily on political will, concerted efforts, and requires more effective multilateral coordination and cooperation. However, the worsening global trust deficit severely impedes international efforts to tackle these global challenges.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 explicitly points out that international cooperation on urgent global issues is increasingly insufficient. The report's assessment reveals that since 2020, global cooperation has generally declined, with notable decreases in collaboration related to peace and security as well as health. Cooperation remains relatively stronger only in areas such as climate and nature, trade and capital flows, and innovation and technology.¹⁹

The decline in cooperative and coordinated actions is evident across many fields. For instance, in combating climate change, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement's principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," developed countries with high emissions are required to act first by rapidly reducing emissions and providing financial support to developing countries for climate action. In practice, however, developed countries have long failed to fulfill their commitments, and their real efforts to meet climate responsibilities have been minimal. This has greatly undermined confidence in achieving climate goals, weakened mutual trust between developed and developing countries, intensified North-South divisions, and slowed global climate action.

As early as the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasized the need to build trust between developing and industrialized countries.²⁰ Scholars studying trust

19 "Davos Calls Again to 'Rebuild Trust'—China Actively Leads Cooperation," *China Youth Daily*, January 19, 2024, p.6.

20 B. Ki-moon, "Adapting to Climate Change," United Nations Secretary-General, 27 July 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2009-07-27/adapting-climate-change>.

also point out that when states realize they are caught in a non-cooperative equilibrium, especially under external pressures, trust becomes unattainable, and cooperation breaks down.

The global trust deficit risks driving deeper division and fragmentation in the international community. In recent years, the trust deficit has been particularly evident among major powers. The lack of trust has deepened suspicion, mistrust, misunderstandings, and misjudgments between these powers, further intensifying competition and confrontation. Taking China-US relations as an example, since Trump took office, strategic mutual trust has significantly eroded, cooperation in various fields has decreased to varying degrees, and competition has intensified. The US has taken an increasingly aggressive stance and implemented unreasonable policies to suppress China in many areas, including economic issues and the South China Sea. In December 2017, the Trump administration released its first National Security Strategy report, explicitly designating China as a “strategic competitor.” In October 2022, the White House issued a revised National Security Strategy report, which still prioritized containment and suppression of China, viewing China as the “greatest geopolitical challenge” facing the US.²¹ The report characterized China as the only competitor with the intent and capability—economic, diplomatic, military, and technological—to reshape the international order, and as the US’s most important competitor. Terms such as “new Cold War” and “decoupling” became common descriptions of China-US relations in the international discourse.

After the Ukraine crisis, the US, together with its allies, supported Ukraine on many fronts and imposed comprehensive sanctions and isolation on Russia. Geopolitical conflicts and interest clashes became more pronounced, with Europe facing the risks of “hot war” and “new Cold War.” According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s 2023 Global Military Expenditure Trends Report, wars and rising tensions have

21 “The National Security Strategy,” The White House.

driven the largest increase in global military spending in over a decade.²² In April 2024, UK Prime Minister Sunak pledged to raise UK defense spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030, effectively putting UK defense into a “wartime state.” The crisis has spilled over into other regions as well, such as intensified US-Russia competition in the Arctic, turning it into another arena of great power rivalry.²³

The outbreak of the Israel-Palestine conflict further fractured the world, with countries holding divergent attitudes toward Israel and Palestine. This division is not limited to Gaza and the Middle East but also across civil societies worldwide. The crisis’s impact has extended into American society, with ethnic, civilizational, and religious clashes erupting on university campuses such as Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia. The US’s stance on Israel has fueled anti-American sentiment across the Middle East, exacerbating tensions between Israel and regional countries. Scholars pointed out that the Ukraine crisis and the Israel-Palestine conflict have intensified global fractionalization. Voting and debates at the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council reveal increasingly evident divisions among countries. Although many nations condemn Russia over the Ukraine crisis, few follow the economic sanctions imposed by the US and Europe. The positions of the “Global South” countries not only reflect their stances on these two conflicts but also reveal their dissatisfaction with the current international order.²⁴

China’s Solution to Rebuild Global Trust

As the world’s largest developing country and second-largest economy, China is increasingly becoming a pivotal force in shaping the direction of global

22 “Global Military Spending Surges amid War, Rising Tensions and Insecurity,” SIPRI, April 22, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity>.

23 “UK Prime Minister Increases Defense Budget, Announces Entry into ‘Wartime Mode’,” April 23, 2024, www.chinatimes.com/cn/realtimenews/20240423005743260408?chdtv.

24 M. C. Pires, “Call for Action the Global South, Having Gained Its Voice, Advocates an Effective Rules-based Order,” *China Daily*, 20 February 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202402/20/WS65d3ea3ca31082fc043b7fcb.html>.

development. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the country has assumed the responsibility of a major power by presenting a series of new concepts, propositions, policies, and initiatives. Through Chinese ideas, solutions, and initiatives, China has contributed its strength to addressing global challenges and improving the global governance system. Looking ahead, China is poised to continue to make important contributions to rebuilding global trust.

Deepening the vision of a community with a shared future for humanity and enhancing global confidence in the future and common development goals is key to rebuilding trust.

This process begins by guiding all countries toward adopting the right concepts and beliefs. The right concept not only reflects humanity’s aspiration for a better future but also shapes the direction of global development by clarifying common goals for all nations. Such a concept must align with the laws of human societal development and the prevailing trends of the times—only then will countries be willing to work together to realize it.

Despite entering a new era marked by global turbulence and transformation, China has consistently emphasized that the overarching trend of human progress will not change, the historical logic of global development will not change, and the trend toward a shared future for the international community will not change. We must maintain confidence in these enduring fundamental directions.²⁵

In response to the pressing question of our time— “What is happening to the world, and what should we do about it?”—President Xi Jinping has proposed the Chinese solution: advancing the building of a community with a shared future for humanity. This concept offers a scientific answer to what kind of world we should build and how to build it. It transcends the outdated logic of zero-sum games and reflects the common aspirations of people around the globe. At a time of accelerating global changes unseen in a

25 “Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech,” December 28, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202312/content_6922977.htm.

century, it provides a clear direction for the future of humanity.²⁶

Since its introduction, the concept of a community with a shared future for humanity has been continuously enriched in theory and has offered concrete guidance and goals for addressing global challenges in peace, security, development, and the environment. In practice, China has made this vision a cornerstone of its major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era. It is actively working with other nations to promote the construction of a world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, and a clean and beautiful environment.

Moving forward, China must continue advancing the understanding of the concept of a community with a shared future for humanity with countries around the world and translate this vision into concrete and effective actions. The country will work in the following areas:

First, it is essential to clearly define the essence of the concept. By explaining principles such as fairness and justice, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual benefit and cooperation, China can highlight its philosophical depth and wisdom. This will help build a broader consensus around the idea that “peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit are unstoppable trends of history,” and promote the transformation of the “Chinese vision” into “global action,” thereby enhancing its global influence.

Second, China must proactively promote the shared values of all humanity. Values serve as the spiritual guidance on the path to achieving goals. For a long time, Western countries have singularly emphasized Western-style democracy and freedom while overlooking the value aspirations and development interests of the broader developing world. China’s advocacy for peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom as shared values of all people reflects a more comprehensive and inclusive global value consensus, one that resonates more strongly with the common pursuit of humanity as a whole.

26 “Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations.”

Third, China must communicate its tangible efforts and contributions in advancing the vision of a shared future more vigorously. Since the introduction of the concept, China has actively promoted it through bilateral, multilateral, and issue-specific initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative, in particular, serves as a practical platform for advancing the community of shared future. Over the past decade, the BRI has evolved from a concept into a tangible action platform and from action into high-quality development. It has significantly enhanced international cooperation and contributed to the prosperity of participating countries, generating numerous compelling stories of shared success. Sharing these principles and success stories also helps enrich the global vocabulary of cooperation and inject more positive energy into international relations.

Finally, it is important to articulate the worldview and methodology embedded in the vision of a community with a shared future for humanity. This concept offers new perspectives and approaches for understanding and addressing the complex problems facing the world today. It emphasizes holism, systemic thinking, and a global-historical perspective. Only by fostering a deep international understanding of these dimensions can the vision be effectively transformed into a new epistemology and methodology, thereby guiding real-world decision-making and actions to build a better shared future for all humanity.

Jointly upholding the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order based on international law, and the fundamental norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter is essential for strengthening global confidence in addressing common challenges.

Despite the current international order facing numerous challenges, increasing instability, and uncertainty, the United Nations remains the most universal, representative, and authoritative intergovernmental organization. It is the central mechanism for achieving world peace and development, an important platform for equal participation of small and medium-sized

countries in international affairs, and the best venue for countries to practice genuine multilateralism. The purposes and principles of the UN Charter remain the broadest common denominator of the international community and continue to be the most effective basis for building international consensus.

China has consistently emphasized that the role of the United Nations must be strengthened, not weakened; its status must be upheld, not replaced.²⁷ At the same time, the United Nations must keep pace with the times through reform and improvement, to better adapt to new realities in international political and economic development, particularly by urgently enhancing the representation and voice of developing countries to promote a more just and equitable global governance system.

Within the UN framework, countries must adhere to genuine multilateralism, making the global governance architecture more balanced and effective in addressing global challenges. In this context, China continues to provide more public goods within its capacity and aligns its efforts synergistically with major UN agendas. Through drives such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the Global Development Initiative, China aims to promote shared prosperity and accelerate the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In response to growing global security challenges, China has proposed the Global Security Initiative, which advocates a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable approach to security. The advocacy emphasizes respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for each country's independent choice of development path and social system—principles that closely align with the UN Charter and are increasingly relevant in today's complex world.

In addition, China's Global Civilization Initiative contributes to promoting mutual learning among civilizations, enhancing cultural exchange, and fostering people-to-people connectivity. Other initiatives, such

27 “Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China's Foreign Policy and External Relations.”

as the Global Data Security Initiative and the Global Governance Initiative on Artificial Intelligence, also reflect China's commitment to working with other countries to address emerging global challenges, showcasing both Chinese wisdom and China's constructive role in shaping the future of international governance.

Promoting the rebuilding of major-power mutual trust and fostering a framework of peaceful coexistence, overall stability, and balanced development among major countries is essential for restoring global confidence in constructive great-power interactions.

Major powers bear a critical responsibility for maintaining global strategic stability—when major-power relations are stable, so is the international order. The more complex and volatile the international situation becomes, the greater the need for major countries to get close to each other and demonstrate their vision and responsibility befitting their global status.

President Xi Jinping has emphasized that “big countries should behave in a manner befitting their status and with a greater sense of responsibility.”²⁸ Stable major-power relations are not only essential to global peace and development, but they are also the expectation of the international community. In March 2024, more than 50 prominent Australians—including former Foreign Ministers Bob Carr and Gareth Evans—co-authored an article calling for a de-escalation of China–U.S. tensions. They advocated for a cooperative security framework based on mutual respect and recognition, emphasizing the need to foster an atmosphere conducive to China–U.S. cooperation on regional and global geopolitical issues.²⁹

At present, in the face of mounting instability and uncertainty, major powers must strengthen unity, rise above differences, and manage risks

28 “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Video Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 2021 Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference,” April 20, 2021, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-04/20/content_5600764.htm.

29 B. Carr, G. Evans and 50 Australian Signatories, “Détente: Towards a Balance of Power Between the USA and China,” *John Menadue’s Public Policy Journal*, January 31, 2024, <https://johnmenadue.com/post/2024/01/australians-join-call-for-usa-china-detente/>.

effectively. They must work together to uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and promote the development of a more equitable and orderly multipolar world.

China has consistently asserted that major-power competition should not define this era. The more turbulent the international landscape becomes, the more imperative it is for major powers to improve coordination; the greater the risks and challenges, the more important for them to deepen cooperation. China remains committed to promoting mutual trust and cooperation among major countries, striving to maintain overall stability in its relations with the United States, Russia, and the European Union, upholding global strategic stability, and actively advancing solidarity and cooperation among emerging powers.

In its relationship with Russia, China continues to support the sound and high-level development of the China–Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era. It seeks to build a new model of major-power relations that is non-aligned, non-confrontational, and not directed against any third party. In China–U.S. relations, China has maintained the stability and consistency of its policy toward the U.S., upholding principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation. China stresses the importance of prioritizing peace, stability, and trust to guide the bilateral relationship toward a stable, healthy, and sustainable trajectory.

At the same time, China is working to build a cooperative, independent, and mutually beneficial relationship with Europe, pursuing a more stable and closer China–EU partnership. It seeks to eliminate the interference of geopolitics and ideology, foster the notion that the two sides are “partners, not rivals,” and jointly become champions of multilateralism, advocates of open development, and promoters of intercultural dialogue.

In addressing hotspots and difficult issues involving major powers, China has actively engaged in mediation efforts, encouraged dialogue, and promoted negotiations. It remains committed to resolving disputes through dialogue and consultation and to managing differences and risks reasonably and peacefully.

Promoting open, inclusive, beneficial, and balanced economic globalization is essential to building global confidence in shared development.

Today, economic globalization faces strong headwinds. The world economy is struggling to recover, global industrial and supply chains are frequently disrupted, and global trade is increasingly characterized by fragmentation and regionalization. Despite these challenges, China remains committed to building an open and inclusive global economic landscape.

In recent years, China's economy has maintained overall stability and played a crucial role as a key stabilizer and driver of global growth. In 2023, China's GDP grew by 5.2%, contributing nearly 35% to global economic growth. China's approach to economic globalization continues to shape the global economy in meaningful ways. Even in the face of rising tides of deglobalization, protectionism, isolationism, and populism, China remains steadfast in advancing high-level opening-up and pursuing high-quality development.

Over the past decade, China has actively promoted high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, strengthened international cooperation, and supported a new round of globalization aimed at building an open world economy that is inclusive and beneficial to all. China has kept its doors wide open to the world by using platforms such as the China International Import Expo (CIIE), the China International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS), the China International Consumer Products Expo (CICPE), and the China International Supply Chain Expo (CISCE) to promote trade and connectivity.

China has also steadily expanded institutional opening-up, shortened the negative list for foreign investment, and improved the overall business environment for foreign enterprises. Recently, China has introduced mutual or unilateral visa exemptions with several countries, facilitating greater foreign access for business, tourism, and education. The country's average tariff level has dropped to a level comparable with that of developed WTO members. The negative list for foreign investment has been reduced to fewer

than 31 items, market access in manufacturing has been fully liberalized, and the opening-up of the services sector is accelerating.³⁰

Looking ahead, China will continue to pursue high-standard free trade agreements, expand its global free trade zone network, and ensure the stable and smooth working of global industrial, supply, and data chains. China will also continue to host major international cooperation platforms such as the China International Import Expo (CIIE), China International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS), China International Consumer Products Expo (CICPE), and China International Supply Chain Promotion Expo (CISPE), and optimize its market-oriented, rule-based, and internationalized business environment to offer global investors greater certainty and long-term benefits.³¹

Only by promoting inclusive and equitable economic globalization can countries, social groups, and individuals alike share in the benefits of economic and social progress and achieve common prosperity. In this endeavor, China is leveraging its developmental strengths to advance the Global Development Initiative, fostering new drivers of global growth and contributing actively to a more balanced, coordinated, and inclusive global future.

Advancing global modernization through the Chinese approach has helped instill confidence among developing countries in charting their own paths toward modernization.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China—and especially following the launch of reform and opening-up—China has completed in just a few decades the industrialization process that took developed nations a much longer time to complete. The success has led to the twin miracles of rapid economic growth and long-term social stability, lifting over 800 million people out of poverty and opening a uniquely Chinese path to modernization.

China is now the only country in the world to possess every industrial

30 “Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations.”

31 *Ibid.*

category defined by the United Nations. Its manufacturing value-added accounts for around 30% of the global total, ranking first globally for 14 consecutive years. The country has developed more than 200 mature industrial clusters, and in terms of scale, completeness, and supporting capacity, China's industrial system can fully meet the demands of rapidly advancing productive forces. This has significantly contributed to optimizing the global allocation of production factors and enhancing global production capacity.³²

Chinese modernization is not merely a successful adaptation of the experiences of developed countries but also a result of China's independent exploration based on its unique national conditions. It is not just China's modernization—it is a component of global modernization. By enriching and expanding the theoretical, practical, and intellectual framework of modernization, Chinese modernization offers a valuable reference and viable alternative path for other developing countries seeking to modernize in a way suitable to their national conditions.

China's development experience and chosen way provided new options and inspiration for the Global South, strengthening their confidence in pursuing their own development goals and ultimately achieving modernization. Looking forward, China will continue to advance the comprehensive project of building a modern socialist country through Chinese modernization and support other developing nations in accelerating their own modernization processes, thereby contributing to the collective progress and development of all humanity.

Conclusion

Trust is a fundamental pillar of stable international relations, global cooperation, and collective effort to address shared challenges. Today's global

32 "Full Text of Premier Li Qiang's Special Address at the Opening Ceremony of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2024," January 17, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202401/content_6926413.htm.


trust deficit, driven by a wide range of complex causes, has permeated nearly all aspects of international politics. The world urgently needs to rebuild trust. Whether the international community can rise above differences, bridge the trust gap, and work together in unity for a common purpose will determine the future of humanity. To restore confidence in the future, all nations must align with the broader trend of human development, upholding mutual respect, equality, and win-win cooperation.

Only through such efforts can humanity jointly confront global challenges, achieve shared prosperity, and guide the world toward a future of peace, security, development, and progress.

The trust deficit stems from a tangled web of disruptions and crises that have bred suspicion, doubt, disappointment, and anxiety. Rebuilding trust is not something that can be accomplished overnight; it requires sustained and concrete actions from the international community. Beyond embracing the right ideas and principles, countries must look for consensus in key areas and take concrete, coordinated actions that reflect their genuine commitments, aligning words with deeds and producing visible, meaningful outcomes.

In response to historical trends and with a strong sense of global responsibility, China has proposed the concept of building a community with a shared future for humanity, offering direction and purpose for global development and the future of humanity. Committed to the vision of global governance based on consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, China actively promotes reform of the global governance system and works with other countries to address global challenges.

China has used the Belt and Road Initiative as a functional platform to share development opportunities and has advanced Chinese modernization as a pathway toward global modernization. The Chinese efforts strengthen the confidence of developing countries in achieving their own development goals.

Moving forward, China will continue to contribute Chinese wisdom and strength, through ideas, solutions, and tangible actions, to support the global effort of rebuilding trust. 



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