

Sri Lanka as China's Human Intelligence Hub: The Four Global Initiatives Facade in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

Amid intensifying Sino-United States competition, the volatile Sri Lanka has emerged as a critical laboratory for China's geopolitical reconfiguration in the Indian Ocean Region. This article analyses how Beijing leverages Four Global Initiatives (4GIs) i.e., Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Civilisational Initiative, and Global Governance Initiative, launched in quick succession between 2021 and 2025, in turbulent Sri Lanka as sophisticated vectors for expanding its peculiar Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations post-Rajapaksa era (Aragalaya Uprising). By analysing recent developments in Sri Lanka, from the prism of Chinese 4GIs, this article attempts to unravel how benign looking initiatives subtly cloak a strategic convergence of Chinese HUMINT and soft power aimed at securing a strategic Sri Lanka to secure its Maritime Silk Route, stabilise the Anura Kumara Disسانayake government, normalising Pax-Sinica norms and, thereby, positioning Sri Lanka as a China's HUMINT hub under the cloak of 4GIs.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's pivotal location astride the Persian Gulf-to-Pacific Energy chokepoints, compounded by its fragile post-2022 *Aragalaya* (struggle) recovery, positions Colombo as the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR) strategic linchpin amid sharpening United States (US)–China–India contestation. The US–Iran conflict escalation, epitomised by the sinking of IRIS Dena off Colombo's coast on 04 Mar 2026¹, and Iranian ballistic strikes on Diego Garcia (20–21 Mar 2026)² exposes Sri Lanka's acute vulnerability to great-power conflict while amplifying China's 'Malacca Dilemma'. China has launched four Global Initiatives (4GIs)—Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilisational Initiative (GCI), and Global Governance Initiative (GGI)—in quick succession between 2021 and 2025 to reorient its global approach away from the hardware-heavy trajectory of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) toward a more holistic model of influence. This shift seeks to mitigate debt-trap perceptions while expanding influence through economic dependencies, security architectures, cultural narratives, and normative frameworks.³

China's recalibration in Sri Lanka via its 4GIs is transforming Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City from vilified BRI 'Debt Traps' into mission-critical dual-use bastions. Under Sri Lankan President Dissanayake, milestones like the Sinopec refinery, maritime accords, and accelerated trade have eclipsed Rajapaksa-era accusations, enabling Hambantota to refine sanctioned Iranian oil, while hosting People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships, thereby, directly challenging the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and countering President Trump's IOR containment strategy. Post-*Aragalaya*, Colombo's pivot to Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (not loans), alongside International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms, cements its role as Beijing's key partner in securing energy supplies, advancing multipolarity, and projecting power in the IOR.

Despite abundant low-risk technological intelligence options, China, with the world's second-largest human asset pool after India, has subtly integrated its peculiar Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations with technology-driven methods. Beijing has refined this hybrid approach by embedding espionage within public diplomacy, reducing detection risks while accelerating operations

and heightening ambiguity to confuse adversaries, thereby, ensuring a resilient, multi-layered espionage ecosystem. As Beijing pivots from COVID-hit BRI infrastructure to normative power via the 4GIs, this article demonstrates how embedded espionage elements have institutionalised China's HUMINT operations through these frameworks, transforming Sri Lanka into a crucible for intelligence-driven global dominance.

Chinese Four Global Initiatives: A Self-Reinforcing Global Ecosystem

The 4GIs marks Beijing's shift from the BRI to a self-reinforcing ecosystem that challenges the Western liberal order by addressing governance deficits in an integrated manner: GDI fosters economic dependencies, GSI builds security and technology partnerships, GCI shapes legitimising narratives, and GGI institutionalises these gains through rule-making influence. Together, these initiatives create a reinforcing cycle of material reliance, security alignment, ideological convergence, and governance influence, thereby, expanding China's geopolitical leverage.⁴ China's official narratives describe the 4GIs as an 'Organic Whole', in which GDI provides the material foundation, GSI safeguards a stable environment, GCI builds value consensus, and GGI supplies institutional guarantees. Under the rubric of the 4GIs, China advances techno-authoritarian models through its economic reach: GDI finances digital infrastructure projects such as the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System and Artificial Intelligence (AI), thereby, creating dependencies; GSI promotes surveillance technologies under the guise of security assistance; GCI legitimises information control as cultural sovereignty; and GGI seeks to reshape existing international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) while proposing parallel institutions, including the International Organisation for Mediation, to influence global dispute resolution mechanisms.⁵

Unique Chinese Human Intelligence Operations

While disruptive technologies enable cost-effective, risk-free data harvesting at scale, China has innovatively evolved its intelligence acquisition by blending HUMINT with cutting-edge tech, creating a hybrid force multiplier for 4GIs-driven influence and dominance. This integration leverages HUMINT's unique edge in capturing nuanced cultural insights that machines cannot replicate. Contrary

to the traditional intelligence collection by a few specialised agents, Chinese agencies use the policy of ‘Thousand grains of sand or mosaic approach or human wave or citizen spying’⁶ wherein they employ numerous Han people and their diaspora settled abroad. Beijing’s creativity and ability to combine all the elements of ‘Societal Power’, including espionage, information control, industrial policy, political and economic coercion, foreign policy, threat of military force, and technological strength, pose a challenge to the existing rules-based international order.⁷

China’s Four Global Initiatives and Human Intelligence Operations

Rob Joyce, former US National Security Agency senior adviser contrasted Russian and Chinese cyber threats, stating, “Russia is the hurricane, fast and hard; China is climate change, long, slow, and pervasive”.⁸ This metaphor captures Beijing’s strategic modus operandi: unlike Russia’s immediate approach, China executes structural, systemic transformation through the evolution of the 4GIs from the BRI, reshaping global norms as remedies for perceived deficits. By positioning itself as a provider of global public goods and addressing growth through GDI, peace through GSI, civilisational dialogue through GCI, and governance through GGI, China has quietly secured structural dominance without triggering alarms, methodically realigning the international order with Xi Jinping’s multipolar vision. This ‘Boiling Frog’ strategy gradually escalates pressure, compelling the Global South to accept each incremental step, from loans to equity FDI, followed by PLAN’s docking rights, security pacts, eventually culminating into complete economic dependency without realising the entrapment until too late.

Chinese Four Global Initiatives and Human Intelligence Influence Operations in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka’s journey from debt-fuelled fury in 2022 to perfect strategic alignment in 2026 validates Beijing’s incremental global strategy, demonstrating how the 4GIs excel through patient, invisible normalisation. Hambantota’s transformation from being a debt trap to becoming GSI maritime security hub, while cultural institutes quietly recruit influencers under GCI cover, exemplifies how Beijing’s preferences are reframed as universal human progress. The idiom ‘A leopard can’t change its spots’ aptly

describes Colombo's trajectory: despite the 2022 *Aragalaya* protests against Chinese debt, President Dissanayake has surprisingly embraced Sinopec refineries, PLAN deployments, tech enclaves, and intelligence networks, converting economic footholds into geopolitical supremacy. Sri Lanka now stands as a strategic crucible where the 4GIs converge to transform infrastructure into sophisticated HUMINT networks. Amid Hormuz disruptions, GDI drives industrial localisation, GSI secures PLAN's access against QUAD's encirclement, GCI positions China as a Buddhist civilisational partner, and GGI coordinates debt-equity conversions. By reaffirming commitment to a 'Community with a shared future' and signing 15 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), Colombo has cemented its role in Jinping's comprehensive architecture, securing China's Gulf oil transits while building pervasive espionage networks to counter Trump's Indo-Pacific containment.⁹

Global Development Initiative and Chinese Human Intelligence in Sri Lanka

GDI, launched at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in Sep 2021, advances the UN's 2030 Agenda via six principles: development as a priority, people-centered approach, benefits for all to leave no country and no one behind, innovation-driven development, harmony between human and nature, and results-oriented actions, with an aim to frame China as the Global South's advocate against Western imbalances. In quick time, GDI gained backing from over 100 countries and organisations, with more than 80 nations in its 'Group of Friends'.¹⁰

Colombo and Beijing have agreed to advance and sign a BRI cooperation plan under the GDI framework in Sri Lanka, fully utilise workshops, and leverage platforms like the China International Import Expo (CIIE) to enhance trade and investment.¹¹ In Sep 2025, Sri Lanka reaffirmed its commitment to GDI in a UNGA Meeting chaired by the Chinese Premier Li Qiang.¹² Post-*Aragalaya*, debt restructuring has positioned GDI as Sri Lanka's economic recovery vehicle, balancing IMF requirements with Chinese equity investments rather than loans. The USD 3.7 bn Hambantota refinery project by Sinopec, announced in early 2026, exemplifies the initiative's focus on industrial localisation and green development.¹³

The Colombo Port City and Hambantota refinery host thousands of Chinese engineers, finance professionals, and technical experts under the GDI framework. The Port City's Special Economic Zone tax incentives and legal autonomy attract Chinese fintech firms and BRI banks, granting them diplomatic-level security and direct flight connectivity while leveraging Silk Road Workshops and CIIE participation to rotate United Front Work Department personnel, thereby embedding HUMINT networks within local communities. Positioned as complementary economic engines, these GDI-branded projects secure a persistent Chinese presence along Sri Lanka's maritime approaches near India under the cover of sustainable development and industrial localisation.

Global Security Initiative and Chinese Human Intelligence in Sri Lanka

GSI, launched at the Boao Forum on 21 Apr 2022, advances six core commitments: indivisible security, sovereignty respect, UN Charter adherence to the legitimate security concerns, dialogue-based dispute resolution, common and sustainable security, and comprehensive traditional and non-traditional security. It prioritises state-centric stability through cyber sovereignty, biosecurity, and AI governance, positioning Beijing as the Global South's security mediator. Operationalised via a Feb 2023 concept paper and platforms like the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum, GSI showcases Chinese surveillance technologies and digital infrastructure to advance win-win partnerships across fragmented geopolitical landscapes.^{14,15} Over 90 bilateral and multilateral documents now incorporate GSI language while systematically converting GDI economic dependencies into enduring security partnerships that discreetly embed Chinese standards.¹⁶ GSI's notable recent achievement is China's mediation of the Mar 2023 agreement, normalising relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, restoring diplomatic ties after seven years and securing commitments from both states to principles aligned with the initiative.^{17,18}

In Sri Lanka, GSI advances China's vision of cooperative security to expand its strategic footprint through law enforcement aid, infrastructure leverage, and bilateral pacts. Sri Lanka endorses GSI facilitating capacity-building in judicial, law enforcement, and security sectors, including equipment, training, and joint operations

against transnational crimes like telecom fraud, evidenced by arrests of Chinese nationals and police deployments for scam probes.^{19,20} In Jan 2025, during the Sri Lankan President's visit to Beijing, a joint statement elevated security ties within their strategic partnership, committing China to anti-crime assistance and maritime cooperation.²¹ The lease of Hambantota Port anchors GSI influence, enabling dual-use access for surveillance vessels despite military curbs, complemented by maritime MoUs on domain awareness and rescue.²² Both nations have committed to maritime security cooperation based on equality and mutual trust, including regular consultations, marine conservation, maritime domain awareness, rescue operations, and a MoU on Ocean Cooperation toward blue partnership.²³

GSI augments China's HUMINT footprints in Sri Lanka by embedding covert intelligence-gathering within overt security cooperation, law enforcement, and infrastructure platforms, transforming economic leverage into persistent human networks. Capacity-building in judicial, police, and security sectors through equipment, training, and joint anti-fraud operations creates prime HUMINT channels. Chinese police deployments for scam probes²⁴ enable operational liaisons to cultivate local informants and recruit assets within Sri Lankan law enforcement to monitor political shifts, economic dealings, and rival Indian and US activities. The Hambantota Port lease serves as a potential dual-use intelligence hub, where surveillance vessels may support not only signals intelligence but also HUMINT activities. Maritime MoUs can facilitate the presence of Chinese advisors among port workers, fishermen, and officials, enabling the collection of coastal intelligence on naval movements and smuggling patterns in pursuit of influence in the IOR. GSI further embeds Chinese diplomats and security attaches as case officers, penetrating decision-making circles amid BRI projects and debt-relief dependencies.

Global Civilisational Initiative and Chinese Human Intelligence in Sri Lanka

Jinping launched GCI on 15 Mar 2023 at the Communist Party of China (CPC) Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, championing civilisational diversity while advancing peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom through China's state-centric governance.²⁵ Rejecting the 'Clash of

Civilisations' rhetoric, GCI promotes mutual learning over Western universalism.²⁶ It exports Confucian-digital authoritarianism via Confucius Institutes, rebranded as Chinese International Education Foundation since 2020²⁷, and World Internet Conference platforms, normalising cyber sovereignty and algorithmic control.²⁸ The Global Civilizations Dialogue Ministerial Meeting in Beijing on 10 and 11 Jul 2025 secured endorsements from over 600 delegates across 140 countries under 'Safeguarding Diversity of Human Civilisations', notably penetrating Eastern Europe.²⁹ China's Jun 2024 UNGA resolution to establish 10 Jun as International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations achieved unanimous adoption.³⁰ By Dec 2022, China listed 43 items on the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Intangible Cultural Heritage roster.³¹

On 07 Jun 2024, Sri Lanka proudly co-sponsored China's UNGA resolution³², a key alignment with GCI's rejection of the Clash of Civilisations rhetoric and promotion of mutual learning, establishing Colombo as an active voice in Beijing-led global forums. On 12 Jun 2025, the 2nd South Asian Sinologists Conference and China-Sri Lanka Scholars' Dialogue held in Colombo featured cultural exhibitions and heritage displays embodying Jinping's 2023 GCI vision. At the opening ceremony, the Sri Lanka Sinologists Council (36th globally) was established alongside the trilingual publication of 1952 Rice-Rubber Agreement parliamentary debates. This institutionalises Sri Lankan Sinology within international networks, coordinating South Asian academic activities to deepen Sino-Sri Lankan cultural cooperation.³³ China and Sri Lanka will further deepen education exchanges through scholarships, Luban workshops, digital classrooms, and develop the China–Sri Lanka Joint Centre for Education and Research. They committed to exchanges in culture, youth, think tanks, sports, media, Buddhism, and sister-city partnerships, with China promoting its language education and supporting Sri Lanka's tourism through the Silk Road Cities Alliance. Additional commitments include health cooperation through Yunnan's Brightness Action and cultural heritage preservation under the Asian Initiative Alliance.^{34,35} In Jan 2026, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised the country's willingness to expand exchanges in governance, infrastructure, maritime affairs, tourism, and cultural cooperation. He also highlighted China's commitment to safeguarding the rights of developing countries, upholding multilateralism, and promoting a fairer global governance system.³⁶

Under the GCI's benign cloak, China establishes covert HUMINT networks in Sri Lanka by leveraging the Beijing-funded Sri Lanka Council of Sinologists to recruit academics and historians as assets. Long-term cultivation via workshops, scholarships, and Buddhist exchanges embeds intelligence requirements within vocational and religious networks, enabling operatives to identify future leaders, gather dual-use technology data, and conduct surveillance under the guise of tourism and heritage preservation. This creates a resilient, deep-cover HUMINT apparatus that penetrates Sri Lanka's intellectual, political, and security elites while evading counter-intelligence scrutiny.

Global Governance Initiative and Chinese Human Intelligence in Sri Lanka

GGI is China's latest global initiative of this decade, forming part of a broader strategy to reshape the international order in alignment with its power, norms, and interests.³⁷ Introduced by Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Plus meeting in Tianjin on 01 Sep 2025, GGI serves as a cornerstone of China's vision for a 'Community with a shared future for mankind', completing the quartet alongside GDI, GSI, and GCI.³⁸ It systematically addresses the fundamental questions of global governance, 'By whom, how, and for whom it is conducted', while responding to the concerns of the international community and presenting itself as the correct choice for tackling global challenges and the essential path to resolving the governance deficit.³⁹ GGI promotes five principles: sovereign equality for universal participation, rule of law for orderly systems, multilateralism for solidarity, a people-centred approach for inclusive outcomes, and real results for efficient processes.⁴⁰ On 08 Mar 2026, Wang Yi stated that more than 150 countries and international organisations have expressed support for GGI.⁴¹

China strategically manipulates multilateral institutions to align them with its preferences, stifling opposition and promoting the CPC's perspectives.⁴² A former UN staffer exposed Beijing's tactics for censoring sensitive issues, altering reports, and marginalising human rights and democracy in UN forums.⁴³ As the US global influence declines under President Trump's retrenchment policy, China fills the gap by penetrating existing organisations and launching new ones in emerging fields like AI, space, and deep-sea mining. GGI, framed as South-South cooperation, fosters

Global South reliance, embeds intelligence networks, normalises Chinese standards, and erodes Western norms alongside institutional accountability. In Oct 2021, while marking China's 50th year as a UN Security Council permanent member, UN Secretary-General António Guterres hailed China as an important contributor and a major pillar of international cooperation.⁴⁴ On 24 Oct 2024, a House Committee report exposed China's co-optation of the UN and World Health Organization, while advancing standards via Huawei and ZTE support.⁴⁵ Beijing also wields financial leverage and key personnel placements in establishments such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, International Telecommunication Union, and Department of Economic and Social Affairs to block resolutions, elevate sovereignty and development issues over liberal values, and forge anti-Western alliances through aid initiatives.⁴⁶

China and Sri Lanka reaffirmed UNGA Resolution 2758, which recognised the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate representative of China to the UN and Sri Lanka's one-China commitment, while agreeing to deepen government, legislative, and political party exchanges to consolidate political trust and share governance experiences. In addition, both the nations aim to jointly advance Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including climate change cooperation.⁴⁷ China pledged continued financial support through IMF coordination, currency swaps with China's Bank, and agricultural cooperation in biotechnologies to boost Sri Lanka's SDG capacity.⁴⁸

Though nascent, GGI offers potent cover for covert HUMINT networks by exploiting reaffirmed commitment to UNGA Resolution and deepened party-state exchanges to penetrate Sri Lanka's apex apparatus. The mandate to 'Share Governance Experiences' provides a direct conduit for Chinese intelligence officers as policy advisors to cultivate and recruit Sri Lankan legislators and senior bureaucrats as assets during closed-door workshops on political trust. Furthermore, Beijing's role as an IMF coordinator and creditor liaison grants unparalleled leverage over Colombo's economic sovereignty, creating a coercive environment where financially vulnerable officials can be turned into sources for sensitive data. Pushing enterprise cooperation embeds collectors within state-owned enterprises and regulatory bodies to map critical infrastructure, while biotechnology and climate cooperation offer

specialised cover for accessing dual-use research. This effectively fuses economic statecraft with a covert HUMINT network, targeting the core of Sri Lankan governance and financial security.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has crystallised as China's premier HUMINT hub in the IOR, where the 4GIs operate not as benign public diplomacy slogans but as a calculated facade for covert intelligence expansion. Pivoting from BRI's 'Debt-trap' backlash amid heightened Sino-US rivalry and US-Iran conflict, Beijing now deploys the 4GIs to recalibrate toward a sustainable path, seamlessly embedding intelligence gathering within developmental and cultural initiatives. Ostensibly, GDI secures economic leverage, GSI legitimises security cooperation, GCI institutionalises academic-religious networks, and GGI engages apex governance. In reality, this holistic approach allows Beijing to subtly infiltrate HUMINT footprints across Sri Lanka's political, financial, and social strata, bypassing counter-intelligence scrutiny. By fusing these initiatives, China transforms Sri Lanka into a secure logistical and intelligence hub essential for dominating the IOR, ensuring Colombo remains firmly anchored within Beijing's orbital influence against the US containment.

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