

Bruegel

# China's Evolving Narratives around the Belt and Road Initiative: A Big Data Analysis

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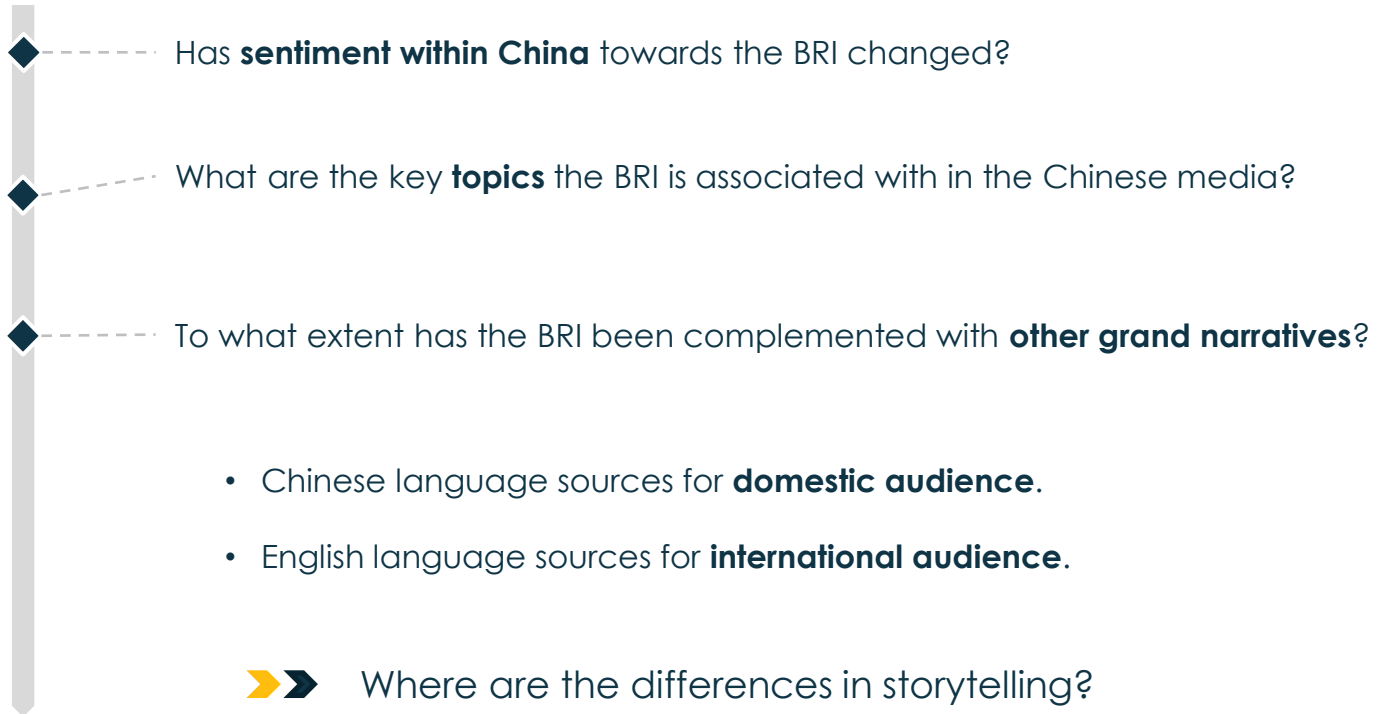
# Agenda

- 1 Intuition
- 2 Data and methodology
- 3 The evolving narrative behind the BRI
- 4 Conclusion
- 5 References

# *1. Intuition*



We found in Article #1 that the image towards the BRI has deteriorated around the world...



# Grand narratives in China



Why do grand narratives like the “Belt and Road Initiative” matter **domestically** ?

“ 上有政策， 下有对策 ”

→ Local governments operate quite autonomously in economic policy.

Joining into these narratives can mean...

- ...increased chances of promotion for **local bureaucrats**.
- ...access to concessional loans, relaxed regulatory treatment for **businesses**.

International implications (e.g. Gambia)



**Party-/State-controlled newspapers** as a mean to communicate these narratives.

## *2. Data and Methodology*

# Data

## Five Chinese newspapers

- *Caixin Global (en) / Caixin (cn)* → Business-focused newspaper
- *South China Morning Post (en)* → Hong Kong-based newspaper
- *People's Daily (en) / Renmin ribao (cn)* → China's main Communist party newspaper
- *Global Times (en) / Huanqiu (cn)* → People's Daily owned tabloid newspaper ("China's Fox News")
- **Xinhua**

## *Different treatment of English and Chinese versions*

## President Xi Jinping's speeches:

-Qiushi

# Methodology

Focus on both the **sentiment** and the **content of the media**

- Sentiment analysis



Aspect-based sentiment analysis using FinABSA algorithm (fine-tuned on financial news)



SnowNLP algorithm applied on the neighbourhood of BRI (+/- 200 characters)

- 
- Topic Modelling: Concept extraction using "BERT model"



## *3. Results*

# 1. Sentiment about BRI in Chinese English media

Sentiment better in China's official media in English, especially Global Times which also pays much more attention to BRI

Figure 3: Sentiment towards the BRI (English language)

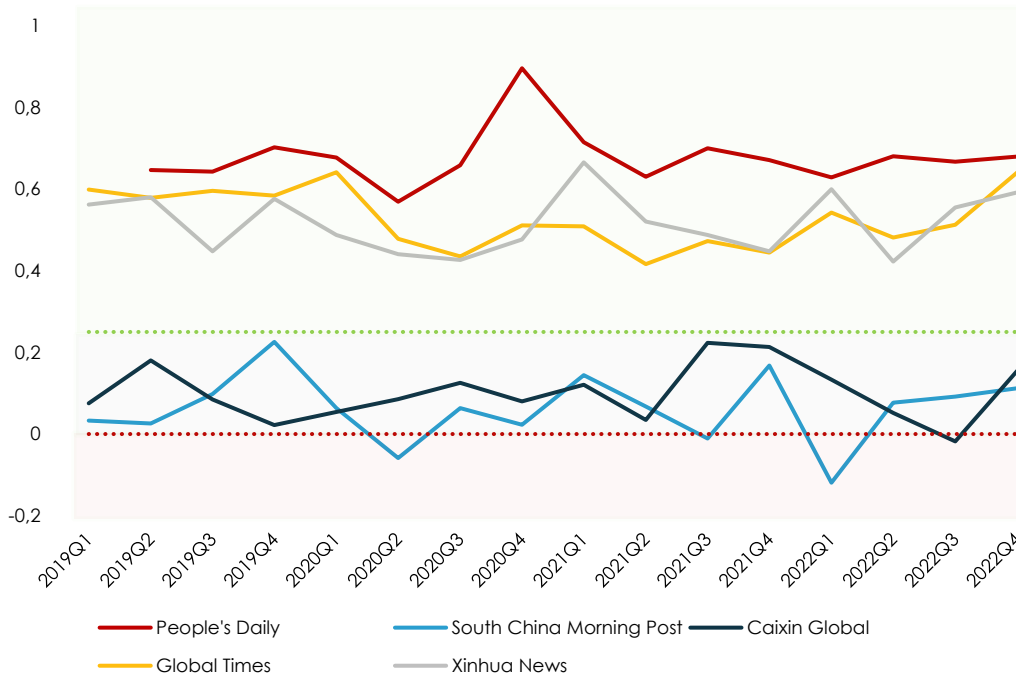
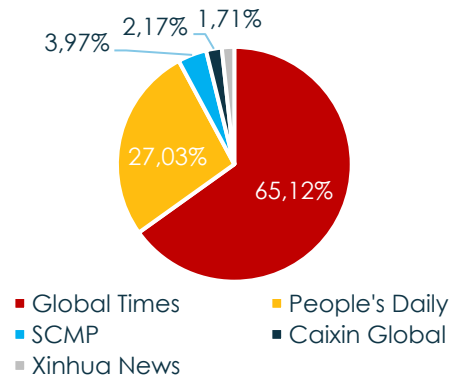


Figure 1: Share of article sources (English)



## 2. Sentiment in Chinese-language media more stable and dominate by business media

Figure 4: Sentiment towards the BRI (Chinese language)

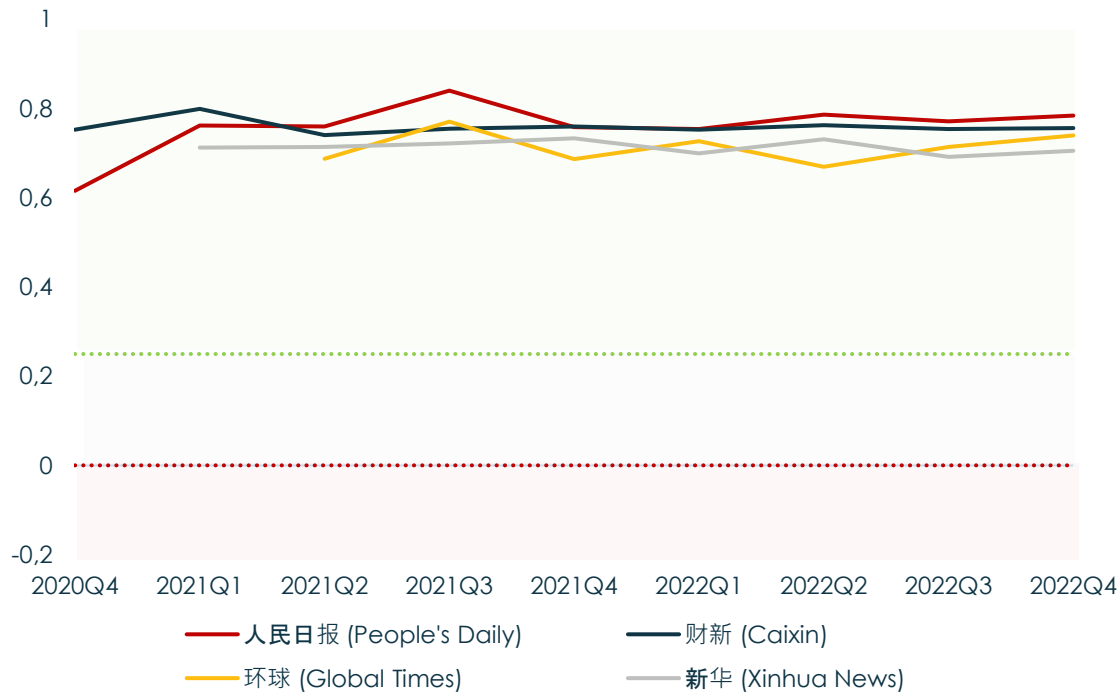
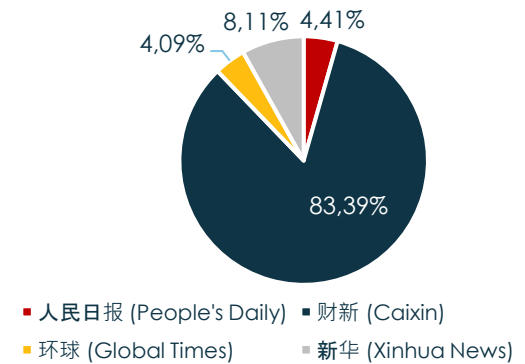


Figure 2: Share of article sources (Chinese)



### 3. BRI-related narrative has evolved in English-language Chinese media into more security/political and less economic ones

#### POSITIVE SENTIMENT

#### NEGATIVE SENTIMENT

2015



2022



## 4. *New initiatives in the official Chinese rhetoric*

### 1 Community with a shared future for mankind

- Popularized in 2017 by President Xi, has since been used in several UN security resolutions.
- Emphasis on a new type of “international relations” based on win-win outcomes and a multipolar world order.

### 2 The Global Development Initiative

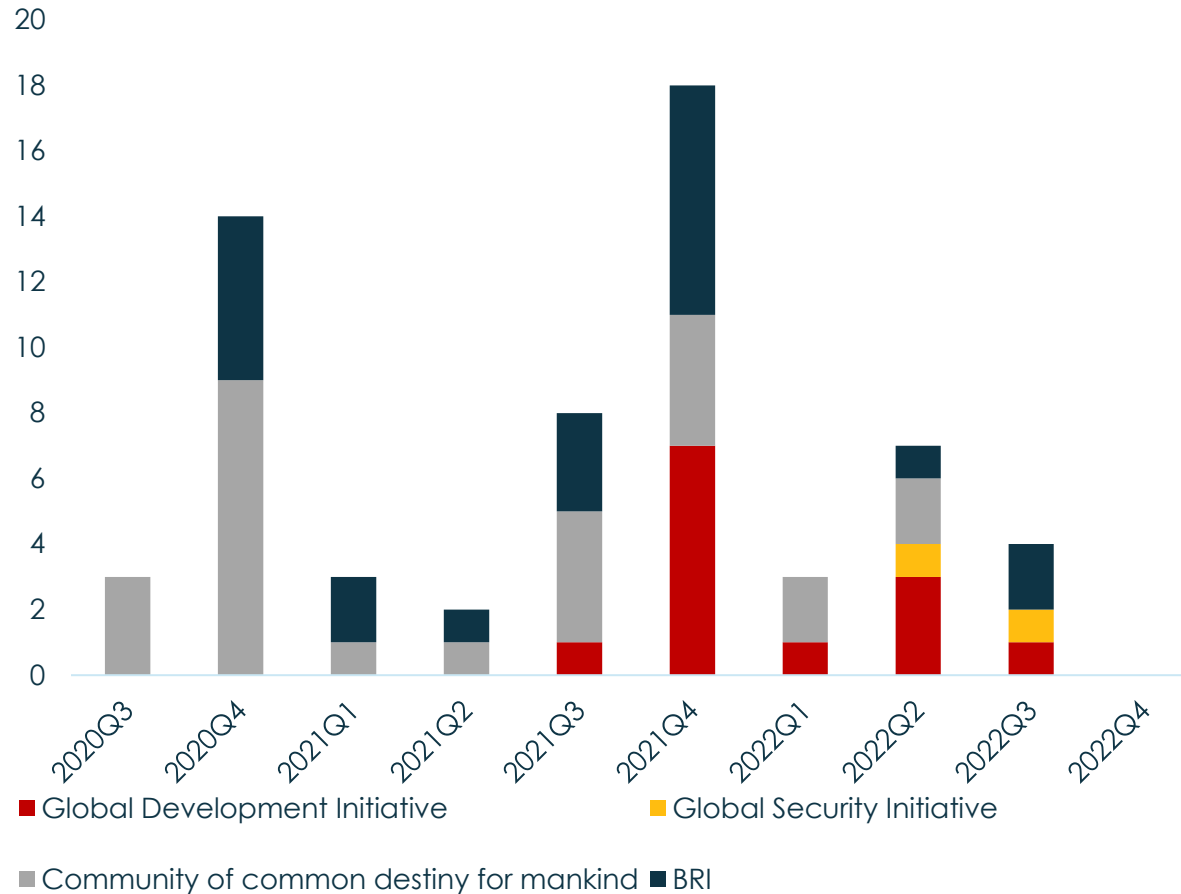
- Announced at the UN General Assembly 2021.
- China-led initiative to advance the SDG 2030 (with a focus on South-South cooperation).

### 3 The Global Security Initiative

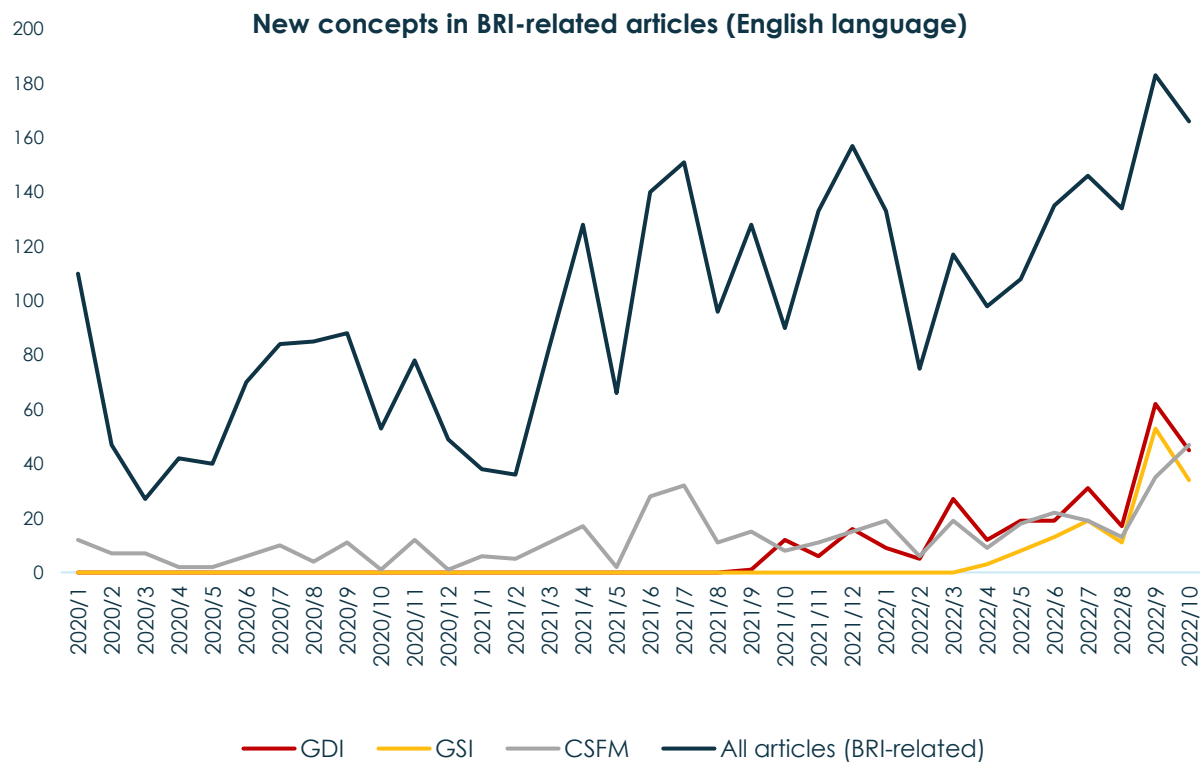
- Announced in April 2022, shortly after the invasion of Ukraine.
- Emphasis on the sovereignty of countries.  
→ Implicit criticism of the "Responsibility to Protect" (Foot, 2020)

## 5. Xi Jinping's speeches offer a clear sign of growing importance of new narratives

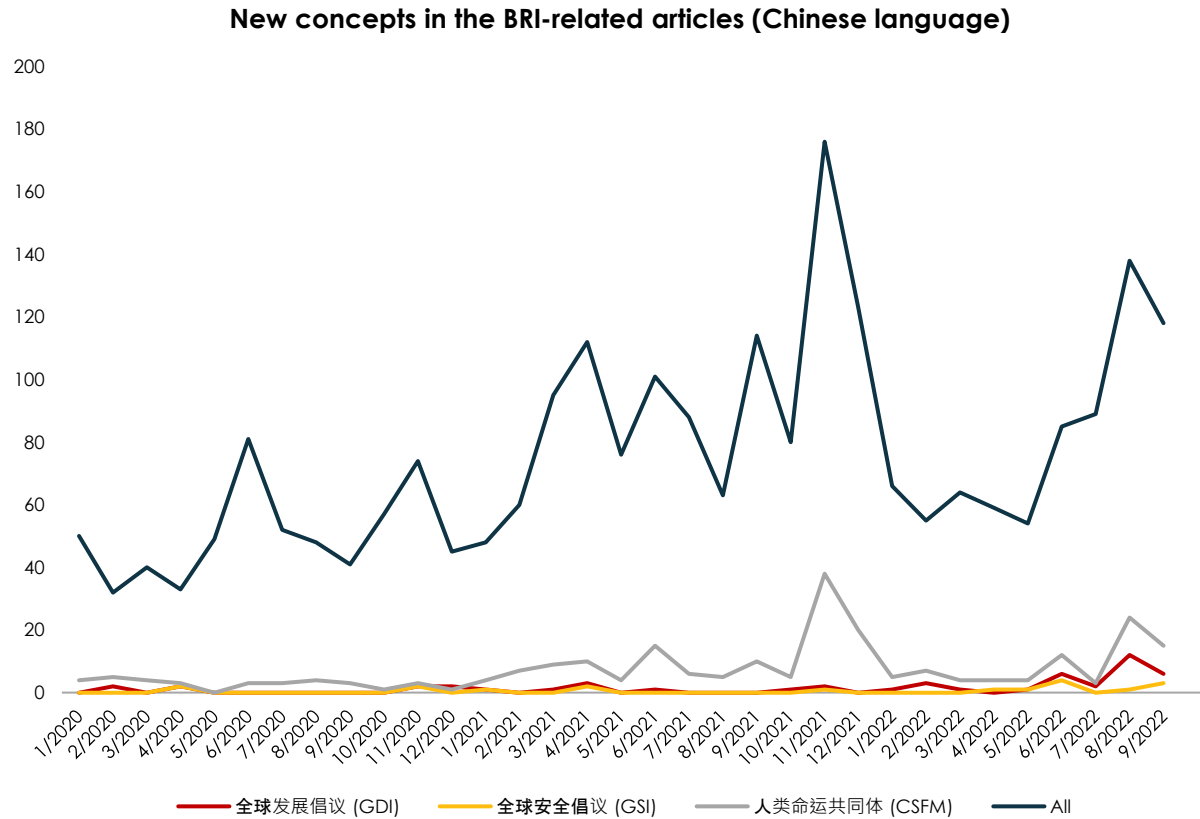
Mentioning of the new initiatives in President Xi's speeches (Qiu Shi)



## 6. The new initiatives start to appear recently in BRI-related articles



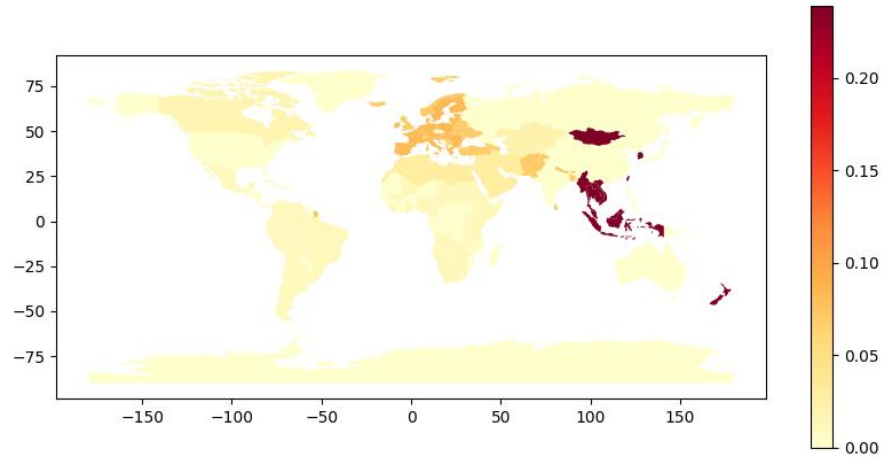
## 7. There is a growing role of new initiatives in BRI-related articles in China which means that they act as complements, not substitutes



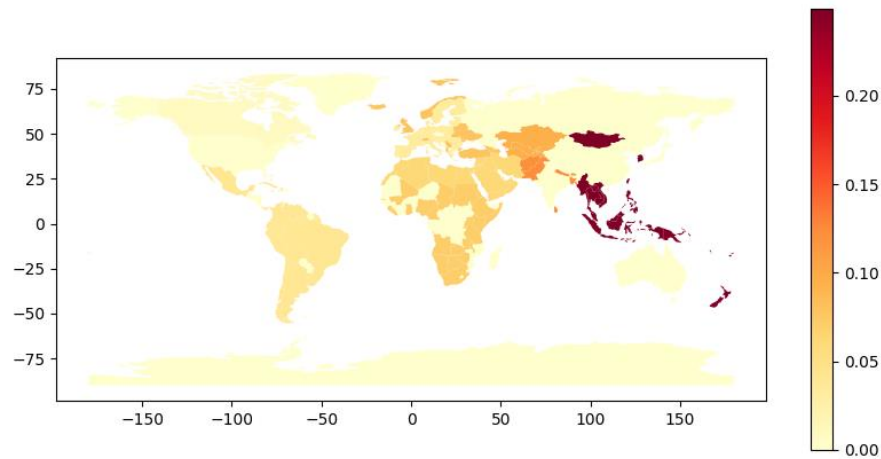


## 8. The focus of the BRI has shifted away from Europe, to the Global South.

% of news articles mentioning countries: 2015

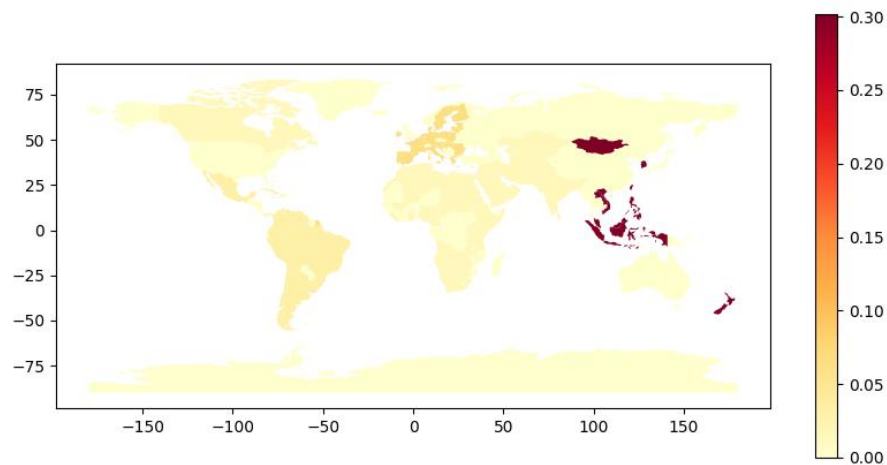


% of news articles mentioning countries: 2022

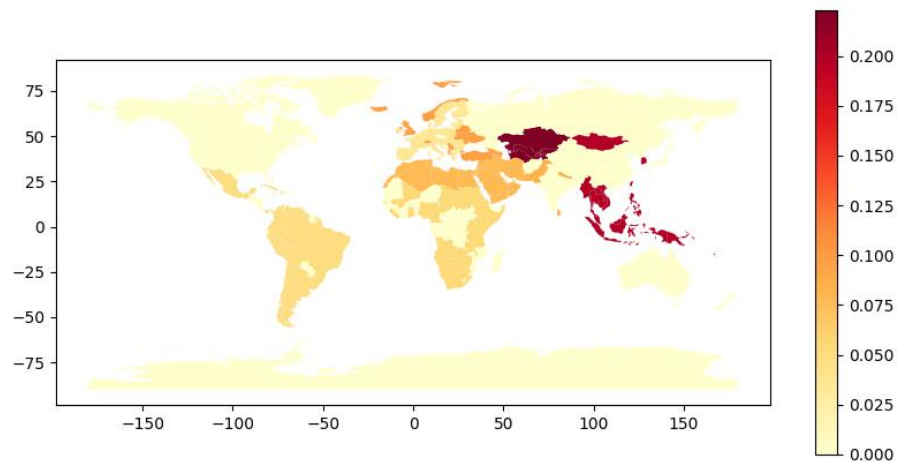


9. A similar pattern is visible for the 'Community with shared future for mankind'.

Community with a shared future for mankind: 2017

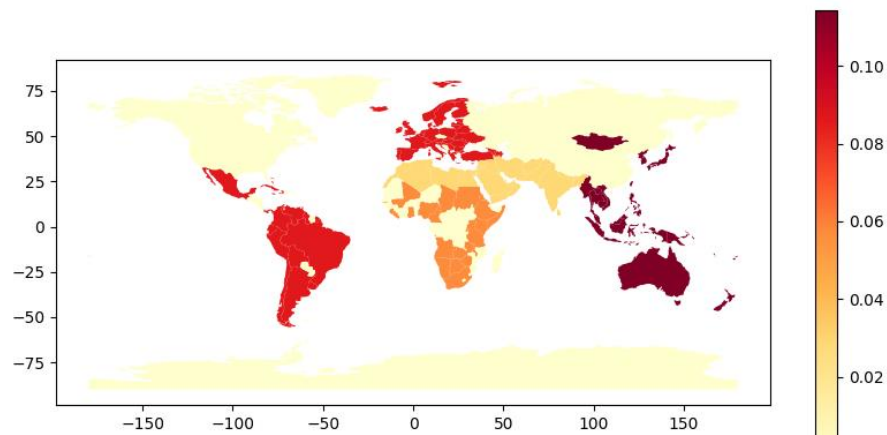


Community with a shared future for mankind: 2022

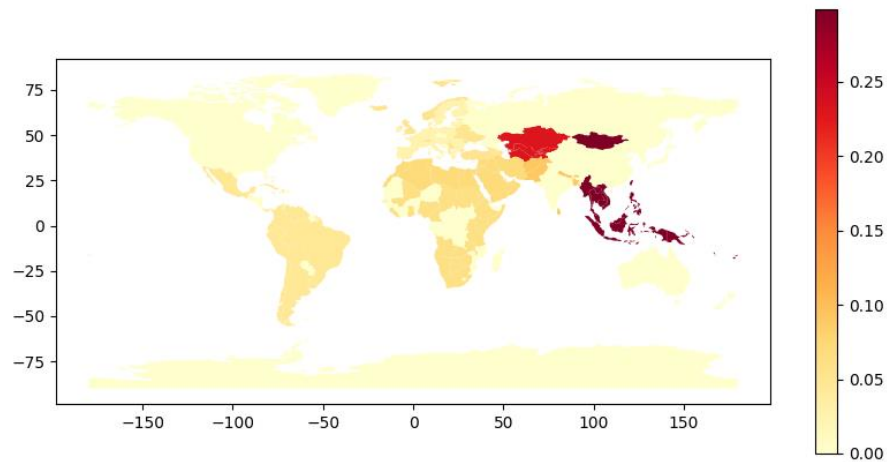


## 10. Similarly for the Global Development Initiative

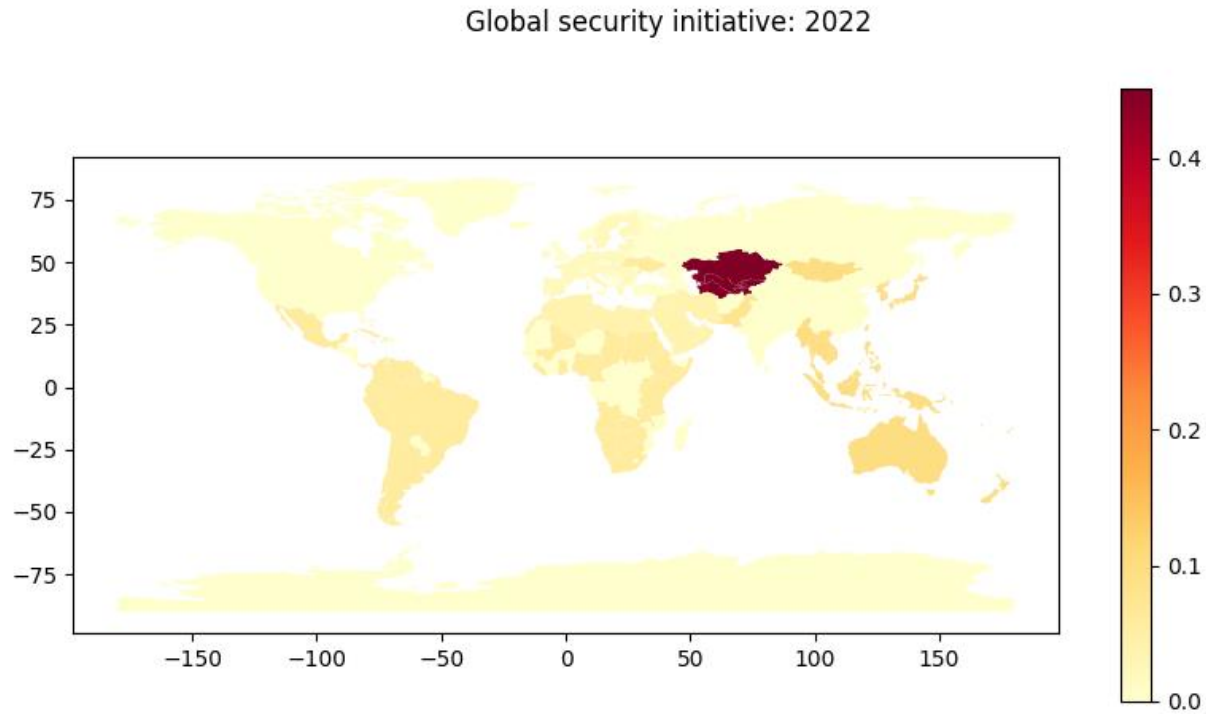
Global development initiative: 2021



Global development initiative: 2022



11. *The Global Security Initiative does not yet have a geographical definition.*



## *4. Conclusions*

# *As the BRI's image is deteriorating, China diversifies its narrative.*

1. The **Belt and Road Initiative has not disappeared** as some may argue, at least not in China's narrative.
2. However, China is **adapting its narrative** to both international and domestic challenges.
3. The focus is shifting from a pure economic focus to a more **political/security focus**, and **new initiatives** are introduced to the international audience at strategic points in time.
4. Such new concepts are not substituting but rather **complementing the BRI**.