In Pursuit of a Community of Shared Future

China's Global Activism in
Perspective

Zhao Xiaochun

Abstract: There has been an increasingly heated debate over the origins and prospects of China's global activism since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held in late 2012. Some in the West view China's proactive diplomatic posture as evidence of a rising power's geostrategic ambition to become the next world hegemon. This article traces the intellectual pedigree and policy relevance of the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind" highlighted in President Xi Jinping's work report to the 19th CPC National Congress in October 2017. Based on a sober assessment of global trends, and drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese wisdom and the Western civilization, this concept represents China's vision of a more just, secure, and prosperous world in

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which China sees itself as an earnest builder of world peace, an important contributor to global development, and a staunch defender of international order. Concurrently, it also marks a transition of Chinese strategic posture from a “hide-and-bide” one to a global activist one. Under this vision, China’s diplomacy has taken on a new look over the past few years. Looking into the future, China is expected to play a more active role in leading international efforts to enhance global governance and exploring new models of cooperation for world development, while attempting to shoulder greater responsibilities as a major emerging power.

Keywords: “Community of shared future for mankind;” Chinese diplomacy; role and responsibility; global activism.

Since the notion to “promote a sense of community of shared destiny for mankind” was first introduced at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in November 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has expounded on the notion on a number of occasions. These included a speech entitled “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” during the general debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015, a keynote speech entitled “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” made at the United Nations Office in Geneva on January 18, 2017, and, more recently, his work report delivered at the 19th CPC National Congress on October 18, 2017, when “building a community with a shared future for mankind” was enshrined as one of the core concepts and basic policies guiding Chinese diplomacy in the new era.

A Community of Shared Future: More Than a New Foreign Policy Doctrine

The vision of human beings as a community of shared future has been codified as an integral part of President Xi’s thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era. It reflects an intellectually coherent analysis by the Chinese leadership of global affairs and represents China’s latest attempt to answer the most fundamental question as to where

humanity is heading in times of greater economic interdependence and growing political divergences.¹

China's commitment to work with the rest of the world toward a community of shared future reaffirms its long-standing foreign policy for peace. In terms of its intellectual origins, that commitment draws inspiration from ancient Chinese philosophy regarding the relationships between diversity and unity, order and chaos, and humanity and nature; it also builds on Marxist theses on social community and contemporary Western theories of international relations. Moreover, the commitment is founded on major diplomatic ideas advocated by top Chinese leaders from Chairman Mao to President Xi Jinping's most immediate predecessor, Hu Jintao. For example, during the Cold War when the two superpowers were engaged in

global rivalry, China enunciated the famous Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,² and pledged that as a newly independent third-world country, it would never seek hegemony in any form, but a more just international economic and political order instead.

Since the launch of the reform and opening-up program in the late 1970s after a completely tumultuous decade, top Chinese leaders have articulated a number of major propositions on foreign affairs, such as the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's "peace

The proposal to build a community of shared future is a latest attempt of the Chinese leadership to define China's role in the world.

¹Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," work report delivered at the 19th CPC National Congress, Beijing, October 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm. See also Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Knopf, 2012); and Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (New York: Portfolio, 2012).

²The principles were first codified in the *Agreement (with Exchange of Notes) on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India*. They are: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual nonaggression; mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.

and development" thesis,³ Jiang Zemin's "New Security Concept,"⁴ and Hu Jintao's call for a "Harmonious World."⁵ The proposal for building a community of shared future is thus the latest attempt of a relentless endeavor on the part of the Chinese leadership to explore and define China's role in — and contribution to — the world.

A rational assessment of global trends makes it clear that the stated goal of building a community of shared future has become even more relevant and imperative in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, in which interests are never country-specific, absolute security is nowhere to be found, and prosperity must be shared by all. As President Xi put it in a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2013,

As a great number of emerging markets and developing countries begin to steer their economies into the fast lane, the world has become interconnected and interdependent to an unprecedented degree. However, humanity still faces many challenges.....The world community should jointly push for the building of a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation at the core, and people of all nations should combine their efforts to safeguard world peace and promote common development.....[H]umanity has never been so better equipped to approach the goal of peace and development, and win-win cooperation is the realistic and feasible way to achieve this goal.⁶

³At that time, Deng proposed that peace and development were the two overriding issues in the world. He believed that the danger of war still existed but that deterring forces were also growing. China, he was convinced, could make important contributions both to world peace and to steady global economic development.

⁴President Jiang Zemin explained in detail the "New Security Concept" in March 1999 when he attended a disarmament conference in Geneva. The defining features of the new concept are mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation.

⁵President Hu Jintao first put forward the idea of building a "Harmonious World" in his speech at a summit meeting marking the United Nations' 60th anniversary in New York in September 2005. The Harmonious World proposal could be seen as a corollary of Hu's domestic policy of building a harmonious Chinese society.

⁶"Xi Jinping Calls for the Building of New Type of International Relations with Win-Win Cooperation at the Core in a Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China," March 23, 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpcf1_665694/t1024781.shtml.

Even as most people in the world share an unprecedented degree of stability and wealth ever created in the history of humanity, the downsides of economic integration and political pluralism are also perceptible. Deficits in peace, development, and governance may be the most prominent negative impacts. In a time of general stability and great-power peace, regional tensions and local armed conflicts continue to make headlines; Cold War mentality and power politics remain influential political thoughts. The slow and sluggish world economic recovery has further widened the gap between the rich and poor. Non-traditional security threats emerge one after another before the traditional ones are effectively contained. Governance failures, especially in the West, have undermined the world's confidence in the Washington Consensus, making more imperative the search for an alternative model that is more just, equitable, and representative.

Indeed, the vision of a shared future for mankind does not grow out of China's interest in accumulating more wealth and power; nor is it a geopolitical scheme to carve out a Chinese sphere of influence. Instead, it represents humanity's relentless pursuit of common interests and universal values. If the vision is part of the Chinese dream, then naturally, that dream is also shared by other nations of the world.

To fulfill the vision, President Xi outlined a five-pronged approach — political, security, economic, cultural, and ecological — in his work report to the 19th CPC National Congress, as he called for the creation of “a community with a shared future for mankind, [...] an open, inclusive,

clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.”⁷

What China advocates in the political dimension of a community of shared future for humanity is a sovereign equality-based world where disputes are settled through dialogue, and peace is built upon partnerships rather than enforced through military alliances or political coercion. China has been

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⁷Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”

promoting a new type of state-to-state relations whereby great powers respect and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns and do not seek conflict or confrontation; small countries are not bullied or coerced by big ones but enjoy equal rights and status. China also perceives advancing frontiers of human activities, such as the deep sea, polar regions, outer space, and the Internet, as emerging strategic domains for closer international collaboration rather than extended arenas for zero-sum geopolitical rivalry.

A community of shared future is also envisioned as a highly globalized world of enduring and universal peace, where the new concepts of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security⁸ prevail over the Cold-War mentality and the centrality of the United Nations is further entrenched — either as an impartial initiator of peace negotiation or a strong and effective peace enforcer. In such a world, international cooperation in the economic and public sectors is strengthened as a supplementary effort to address traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

A shared future must also be built on common prosperity through win-win cooperation. Development is only meaningful when it is inclusive and sustainable. Standing at the threshold of a new era of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation, China will intensify its effort to unleash productive capacity and social creativity. Its intent is to implement an innovation-driven domestic development strategy and remain committed to building an open world economy by upholding WTO rules and regulations, as well as to steer globalization in a more open, inclusive, balanced, and sustainable direction abroad.

A community of shared future also means an open and inclusive world with intensified inter-civilization exchanges. Unity in diversity can only be fostered by dialogue on equal footing and mutual learning among different cultures. Each culture makes its contribution to mankind as a whole. No nation can claim that its civilization is superior to others' and therefore

⁸Common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security are four key elements of the "New Asian Security Concept" proposed by President Xi Jinping in his remarks at the 4th Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) on May 14, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml.

universally applicable. It is China's belief that cultural diversity should not be a cause of conflict, but a reservoir of human potential.

Meanwhile, a community of shared future represents a green, clean, and beautiful world. Fostering a sustainable eco-system is vital for the future of mankind. All members of the international community should work together to build a sound global eco-environment. In this respect, China calls on all nations to pursue green, low-carbon, holistic, and sustainable development, while it also makes every effort to respect and protect nature amidst the growing domestic need for rapid economic growth. In fact, China has shouldered much bigger responsibility in the past decade, as indicated in its contribution to the signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change in April 2016, and it will continue to play its part in this joint endeavor. At the same time, it urges other countries, in particular the developed ones, to fulfill their historical responsibility, honor their emission reduction commitments, and help developing countries mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Reflecting mankind's common aspiration for peace, development, cooperation, and progress, this five-dimensional vision of a community of shared future represents not only a grand goal for China's diplomacy, but also China's wisdom in a better global governance blueprint.⁹

From “Hide and Bide” to Global Activism

From a historical perspective, the call to build a community of shared future for mankind reflects China's evolving strategic thinking and a changed perception of its international status. Since the beginning of the 21st century, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008, the debate over China's ascendance and its implications has greatly intensified. Mis-perceptions and distortions regarding China's elevated power position and strategic posture in the international hierarchy are widespread in the Western media and academic circles. Some see China as an emerging military power threatening world peace; some call it a revisionist power intent

⁹Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” statement at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly New York, September 28, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1305051.shtml.

on overturning the current international order; and some others label it a trade giant practicing neocolonialism in the developing world.

As a matter of fact, the CPC and the Chinese government have always been explicit about China's international status and strategic posture, as reflected in different formulations targeting both domestic and foreign audiences, such as "the largest developing country," "a country still in the primary stage of socialism," "a great power on the path of peaceful development," and "an emerging power that will never seek hegemony." President Xi's stated goal for China to be an earnest builder of world peace, an important contributor to global development, and a staunch defender of international order has added a new sense of mission to China's foreign policy.

China's commitment to safeguard world peace was reaffirmed by President Xi in his keynote speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva in early 2017:

We are committed to peaceful development. No matter how the international landscape may evolve and how strong it may become, China will never pursue hegemony, expansion or sphere of influence. . . . - China will continue to contribute to global development. China will [also] continue to uphold the international order. We will stay committed to the path of development through cooperation.¹⁰

The Chinese people cherish peace not only because they live by ancient admonitions on statecraft like "fostering amity in the neighborhood," "unity without uniformity," and "peace is the most precious asset," but also because they have come to the conclusion — after a full century of sufferings and upheavals from the mid 19th century to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 — that peace and stability are the prerequisites for development and prosperity.

The CPC continually reiterates its determination for peaceful development to both domestic and foreign audiences.

¹⁰Ibid.

Admittedly, China's spectacular rise over the past decades is the result of its deepening integration into the global economy and ever-closer relations with the rest of the world. As it continues to rise in the global economic hierarchy, China is striving to turn itself from one of the largest beneficiaries of globalization to an important contributor to global development. As President Xi put it,

*[W]hen the world is doing well, China will also do well, and vice versa. . . . China will continue to implement the win-win strategy of opening-up, share its best practices and development opportunities with other countries, and welcome them aboard the fast train of China's development.*¹¹

Over the past centuries, a series of universally accepted norms have been established as the basic principles governing international relations, for example, sovereign equality enshrined in *Peace of Westphalia*, international humanitarianism affirmed in the *Geneva Convention*, the four purposes and seven principles codified in the *United Nations Charter*, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence championed by the Bandung Conference, all of which should serve as the underpinnings of the community of shared future for mankind. As a responsible socialist country, China remains committed to building a more just and equitable international order based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

If official statements released before the 19th CPC National Congress had replied to questions as to what kind of a nation China is, what path China will take, and what China would or would not do with its growing power, then Xi Jinping's report at the 19th CPC National Congress has made

it clear to the world the global responsibilities and roles that China is ready to assume. It is a firm rebuttal against unfounded Western accusations and distortions.

The call to build a community of shared future marks the beginning of China's global activism.

It can be seen that the call for building a community of shared future marks the beginning of China's global activism. China's diplomacy had been guided by Deng

¹¹Ibid.

Xiaoping's famous dictum "hide our strength and bide our time (*taoguang yanghui*)"¹² for nearly three decades since the early 1990s when the paramount leader warned against excesses in either rhetoric or behavior and emphasized the strategic imperative of economic development. At the same time, Deng also dismissed the idea that China was irrelevant on the international stage and believed that China could and should make a difference. In fact, since the beginning of the 21st century, as China's comprehensive power grows steadily, there has been an increasingly heated debate on whether China should continue to keep a low profile or assume a more proactive posture.

In his remarks at a CPC working conference on neighborhood diplomacy held on October 24, 2013, which also set the tone for China's diplomatic posture over the following years, President Xi emphasized that China needed to be more proactive in fostering and exercising responsible leadership in its neighborhood, in order to create a more favorable environment for common development.¹³ To put this new perspective into practice, China has increased its global visibility by spearheading ambitious initiatives like the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and making proposals for improving global governance.

The logic behind the transition from the "hide and bide" posture to recent global activism is best summed up in President Xi's New Year Address for 2016:

We have only one earth, this is the homeland of all peoples in the world. . . . The world is too big, and challenges are too many, to go without the voice from China being heard, without solution ideas from China being shared, without the involvement of China being needed. To

¹²There are many interpretations to the dictum, the most popular of which is "keeping a low profile and hiding one's brightness." See Deng Yuwen, "How to Understand China's Foreign Policy," Foreign Policy, April 23, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/23/how-to-understand-chinas-foreign-policy/>.

¹³"Xi Jinping zai zhoubianwaijiao gongzuo zuotanhui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua [Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at CPC Working Conference on Neighborhood Diplomacy]," People's Daily, October 25, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1025/c1024-23332318.html>.

*those suffering from hardships and wars, we not only express our sympathy and solidarity, but will also take duty bound actions to provide help. China will, as always, open its arms to embrace the world, and offer its helping hands to those in need.*¹⁴

What is suggested in President Xi's remarks is that in an increasingly interdependent world of proliferating crises and growing uncertainties regarding world peace and development, China's fortunes and future are closely linked to those of other nations. If left untended, those crises will ultimately hurt China's development. As the world's second-largest economy and the biggest trading nation, holding more foreign exchange reserves than any other nation, China has already become the largest engine propelling world economic growth over the past few years. Moreover, China's ascendance in global multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also raised the expectations of other nations for more Chinese input into the global effort to address immediate and long-term challenges.

In this sense, China will endeavor to assume a larger role and greater international responsibilities as its economic prowess, military capacity, and geopolitical influence continue to grow. As spokeswoman for China's Foreign Ministry put it,

*China always maintains that all nations, big or small, are equal members of the international community. At the same time, we also believe that [being] in possession of more resources and capabilities, great powers should shoulder greater responsibilities and make more contributions.*¹⁵

What should be noted is that although global activism has been a defining feature of China's diplomacy in recent years, it is hardly a total departure

¹⁴"Chinese President Xi Jinping's New Year Speech 2016," China.org.cn, January 4, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2016-01/04/content_37452232.htm.

¹⁵"Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 17," Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 17, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1462822.shtml.

from Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide" axiom as observed by many Western media.¹⁶ To clarify this, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in a press interview during the 19th CPC National Congress:

*The 'hide and bide' dictum still guides China's diplomacy, because China remains the largest developing country in the world and our primary focus is still on economic development. But the changing international environment also necessitates adjustments to the dictum. Presided over by Mr. Xi Jinping, China's diplomacy will be conducted with a broader mind and at a higher standing. Guided by the Xi Jinping Thought, China's diplomacy will make new international contributions on the one hand and score new successes on the other.*¹⁷

A Great Power in Action

The score card of China's diplomacy is indeed impressive. First, it has fostered growing international consensus on building a community of shared future for mankind — both a lofty goal and a common cause worthy of the joint efforts of all nations. China's call for a community of shared future has been repeated on many occasions since the 18th CPC National Congress. President Xi himself elaborated on the concept at every visit to other countries and the United Nations. He also proposed to build a "community of nuclear security" featuring equality and win-win cooperation at the 4th Nuclear Summit in Washington, D.C. in April 2016. Furthermore, he called for a "cyber community of shared future" at the 3rd World Internet Conference held in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province in 2016.

The concept has been promoted and welcomed by many multilateral institutions. Most notably, it has been written into United Nations resolutions on numerous occasions. The *Beijing Initiative*, a joint statement

¹⁶See, for example, Charles Clover, "Xi Jinping Signals Departure from Low-Profile Policy," *Financial Times*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/05cd86a6-b552-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399>.

¹⁷"Wang Yi huiying zhongguo shifou fangqi taoguangyanghui waijiao zhengce [Wang Yi Replies to Whether China has Abandoned 'Hide and Bide' Foreign Policy]," *Eastday.com*, October 19, 2017, <http://mini.eastday.com/a/171019221538457.html>.

endorsed by more than 300 delegates representing political parties and organizations in more than 120 countries who attended a high-level dialogue with the CPC leadership in Beijing in late 2017, called on all nations to “foster and embrace the idea of interconnectivity of interests and a shared future in place of the self-concern mindset and dichotomic mentality, and promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind and a better world.”¹⁸

China’s vision of a community of shared future has received worldwide recognition.

Second, with the increasingly frequent withdrawal from global commitments by the Trump administration, China has begun to play a leading role in improving global governance by contributing Chinese solutions and wisdom. In the political realm, China advocates that a new type of international relations based on win-win cooperation is needed to promote dialogue and

partnerships rather than confrontation and alliance among different countries. On security affairs, the New Asian Security Concept proposed by President Xi at the 4th CICA summit in 2014 has been implemented by the Chinese government and endorsed by a growing number of countries in the developing world. With respect to global development, China continues to promote the BRI, while laying out a Beijing Roadmap for establishing a free trade zone in the Asia-Pacific region at the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting, and calling for leadership of the world economy to take on a more innovative, open, interconnected, and inclusive direction at the Group of Twenty (G20) Hangzhou Summit in 2016.

Third, China is championing a new model of economic cooperation by vigorously promoting the BRI. With the aim of enhancing inter-connectivity and complementarity among countries along the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “Maritime Silk Road,” the initiative has produced tangible results far exceeding everyone’s expectations after four years of concerted efforts by both domestic and foreign stakeholders. In May 2017, more than 1,500 representatives from over 130 countries and 70 international organizations, including 29 heads of state and government, attended the Belt and

¹⁸For the full text of the *Beijing Initiative*, see *China Daily*, http://language.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-12/04/content_35199254.htm.

Road Forum for International Cooperation, and reached broadly-based agreements on the extent, direction, scope, and depth of the grand project.¹⁹ Moreover, the Belt and Road Forum has been institutionalized with the establishment of a number of advisory committees and liaison offices. The early success of the BRI indicates that a new model of economic cooperation is taking root, featuring increasing inter-connectivity, broad consultation, joint efforts, and shared benefits.

Last but not least, China has assumed new responsibilities required of a great power in global affairs. Guided by the principle of non-alignment, China has reached out to the world even further by building up a network of strategic partnerships with 79 countries and three major regional institutions, namely the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU). China has also played a decisive role in addressing local and regional security issues. For example, it participated in the "P5+1" process to achieve the Iran nuclear deal, works closely with the United States, South Korea, and other concerned parties for the ultimate denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, hosted the 4th Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, reached a Code of Conduct framework in the South China Sea with ASEAN members, and helped to advance the peace talks on the Ukraine crisis.

China has also been part of international anti-terrorism cooperation within various multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, APEC, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). For instance, in 2015, together with Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, China proposed and submitted to the United Nations an *International Code of Conduct for Information Security*. Furthermore, China has joined the new UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System and provided a standby peacekeeping force of 8,000 troops.

Concurrently, China has played a prominent role in promoting global development. For example, to address funding shortages impeding regional infrastructure improvement, China initiated the establishment of the Silk Road Fund, the New Development Bank (NDB), and the AIIB. For another example, in December 2015, China submitted *Enhanced Actions on Climate Change: China's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions* to the

¹⁹"Building the Belt and Road for Win-win Development," *China Daily*, February 13, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-02/03/content_28087627.htm.

Secretariat under the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) and worked tirelessly with the rest of the world for the adoption of the Paris Agreement at the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP21). China also played a constructive role in the adoption of the *United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. All these indicate that as a responsible great power, China is determined to work with other nations to fulfill the vision of a community of shared future for mankind.