



Leading Comments at CCICED 20th Anniversary Open Forum

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Madame President, State Counsellor Song Jian, Minister Zhou, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am most grateful for this opportunity to speak at the 20th Anniversary Forum of the China Council which has proved to be a unique and constructive channel for cooperation between China and the world community.

This anniversary is, I believe, an appropriate occasion to say a few words about the origins of the Council, to consider the underlying reasons for its success and to identify some key opportunities and challenges for the future where the China Council can continue to make important contributions.

The origins of the China Council

In my view, the decision by the Chinese authorities to establish the Council was not a sudden inspiration but was a coherent step in the wider processes of reform and opening up which were initiated in the late 1970's. From my perspective, the very first step was the organization in 1983 of a high-level conference in Beijing on the core issue of "Mobilizing Science, Technology and Investment for China's Development." In those days, China's development strategy was organized around the "four modernizations", one of which was Science and Technology. The participants had the unexpected privilege of a three hour exchange of views with Premier Zhou Xiyang. Although we did not realize it at the time, this established an important precedent of providing a wide range of experience and ideas from different countries directly to the leadership of China.

Note 1: A shortened version of this text was presented at the 20th Anniversary Forum

Building on this initial success, the next major step was the convening of an international conference in June 1988 which provided an opportunity for dialogue between the leadership of China and a group of international leaders and experts on the key strategic issues of China's reform and opening up to the outside world. We had the remarkable and unique opportunity to exchange views successively with the three top leaders of China, including a two hour meeting with supreme leader Deng Xiao Ping.

One point on the Agenda of this 1988 conference specifically focused on the significance of environmental and resource constraints as a determinant of China's long-term development strategy. This environmental perspective was reinforced by a parallel programme focused on the establishment of a Council to guide the development of the island of Hainan, the largest Special Economic Zone in China, so as to achieve economic progress in harmony with the environment. Although this effort did not ultimately succeed in its purpose, as the pressures of economic development overwhelmed the concern to preserve the environment, it did provide a precedent for the later establishment of the China Council.

Out of this meeting with the leaders of China emerged a programme of international cooperation "China and the World in the Nineties" which provided the Chinese leadership directly with focused international advice and experience on a series of key reform issues. This programme which continued over about ten years in partnership with the Development Research Center of the State Council and the State Development Planning Commission, now NDRC, laid the foundations for the development of the China Council.

It was in this context that three very senior and distinguished Chinese personalities, in a letter of 10th January 1990, proposed an initiative to focus attention on the core issue of environment as critical to the future of China's development, recognizing the important opportunities of international cooperation in this field.

I am very happy to take this opportunity to congratulate two of these remarkable personalities who are with us here today. Without their committed efforts, the China Council would not have been established: They are of course Dr. Song Jian, then State Counsellor and Chairman of the National Environmental Protection Commission of the State Council and Dr. Qu Geping, then Administrator of the National Environmental Protection Agency. These two remarkable personalities have been for decades, the pillars on which the movement towards a sustainable path of economic progress in China has been founded. The third important supporter of this initiative was Professor Ma Hong, President of the Development Research Center of the State Council.

Let me quote a few lines from this letter which was, at the time, a remarkable and



perceptive statement of intent:

“The Chinese government has decided to invite a small number of international personalities to visit Beijing for discussions with the leadership about a major new programme of international cooperation on the conservation of the environment in China.

We recognize that the protection of the environment in China is essential to the future of the Chinese people. We are also fully aware that the People’s Republic of China, which constitutes about one fifth of the world population, must actively take part and sincerely cooperate with other countries in the global efforts to resolve the serious environmental problems which threaten our planet.

The Chinese government is already making substantial efforts on environmental matters with limited resources available. We wish now to continuously strengthen our ability to tackle our environmental problems. This will help to improve our economic prospects and provide a healthier, more productive and better life for the Chinese people.

If we can, with international support, coordinate and manage the environmental issues of China harmoniously with our economic growth, this will make important contributions to reducing the threats to the world environment as a whole.....

International cooperation and support will be critical to the success of our work. For this reason, the Government has decided to arrange this international meeting so that we can explore the possibilities at a high policy level. We hope to make a rapid start and stimulate substantial new programmes of international cooperation.”

The letter concluded as follows: “We hope that the private high-level meeting will help us, in a spirit of openness and cooperation, to define a strategy and to initiate action which will enable us to combine economic growth, modernization and reform with the long-term conservation of the environment. This will be not only in the vital interest of China, but of the whole world.”

It was on this basis that we were able to convene a major international conference focused on “The Integration of Environment and Development” here in the State Guest House in October 1990. I would like to record that it was visionary support by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations which made it possible to take this critical step towards the establishment of the China Council.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Song Jian, who chaired the Conference, indicated that the Chinese authorities were in principle prepared to consider the establishment of some form of organizational arrangements to ensure that work on the important issues which were the focus of the Agenda should continue after the conference. The conference was indeed a considerable success and, already at the closing banquet in the Great Hall of the People, Dr.



Qu Geping was able to inform us that Premier Li Peng had authorized the necessary steps to create an organizational framework to follow up the ideas and proposals made at the conference.

Thus, in October 1990, we had a remarkable opportunity to establish an institutional arrangement to promote the integration of environment with the economic development of China. But two fundamental issues remained: how to design a suitable – and unprecedented – institutional framework and how to find the essential financial support quickly so as to maintain the remarkable political interest and support which the initiative enjoyed at the highest levels of the Chinese government.

Here I would like to underline the important role played by another key personality who, unfortunately cannot be with us here today. This is Mr. Xie Zhenhua, now Vice Chairman of NDRC for Energy Efficiency and Climate Change, former Minister of Environment and then, in 1990, Deputy Administrator of the National Environment Protection Agency. Under the guidance of Dr. Qu Geping, we together drafted the Charter of the China Council by March 1991 which, with the support of Dr. Song Jian and Qu Geping, was then approved by the State Council.

In spite of all this remarkable and rapid progress, the final essential step towards the establishment of the Council remained to be taken: how to find the initial financial support to launch the Council quickly and convincingly. In view of the long and positive relationship between Canada and China since the founding of New China in 1949, I visited Dr. Marcel Massé, President of CIDA in Ottawa and asked him for the necessary support. He confirmed to me within six weeks that CIDA would provide the requested CDN\$ 5 million over five years to support the Council.

I would like to express my deep appreciation for this early and generous support which enabled us to organize the first session of the Council, here in the State Guest House, in April 1992. The sustained support of CIDA, which continues to this day, has also provided a solid basis for the work of the Council and a framework within which many other donors have now given their support to the Council. This has assured a rare degree of stability and predictability on which the serious longer-term activities of the Council have been sustained. The cooperation between Canada and China, especially between CIDA and the Ministry of Environmental Protection, supported by an excellent and committed team of officials and experts on both sides, has guided the development of the Council over the past twenty years and has been, from the start, a key element in its continuing success.



Reasons for the success of the Council

The China Council has proved to be an unusual success in enhancing international cooperation between China and the world community in the vital area of environment and development. Let me suggest some of the key reasons for this success. In my view, these must be preserved to ensure the continuing relevance and effectiveness of the Council:

(1) First, the leadership of China is unusually open to considering international experience and advice. But, most important, they then critically assess the diversity of opinions and experience which is presented and select and test those elements which are most relevant to the needs, the culture, the conditions and the aspirations of China. The Members of the Council therefore have the rare privilege of engaging with top leaders on the key issues of China's development strategy and international cooperation. They have had for twenty years, the opportunity to focus attention on strategic choices, risks and opportunities in a future-oriented perspective.

And, as China's role in world affairs becomes ever more significant, this opportunity which the Council has to strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation will be of even greater value in the future. It is also increasingly important for other countries across the world to understand the ideas, achievements and aspirations of China.

(2) Second, the Council's mandate and activities focus on the central issue of the integration of economic development with energy and resource use and the environment. The ability of China to raise the living standards of its vast population while respecting real environmental and resource constraints is perhaps the most significant challenge to the future success of China's development strategy. The balanced and integrated approach adopted by the China Council which covers the wide range of connected issues related to economic development and environment is crucial. Development and environment are in fact, two sides of the same coin. The strong engagement of the powerful economic organs of the Chinese government, particularly of NDRC, in the work of the Council is thus of particular importance as China moves towards a path of sustainable development.

(3) Third, on the Chinese side, the Council is intended to bring together participation across the government, from the wide range of ministries and agencies engaged in the issues of environment and development. This cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary collaboration on which the Council is founded is difficult, but it is increasingly needed to address the connected challenges of the modern world.

(4) Fourth, the credibility of the recommendations and suggestions of the Council depends on the solid, continuing work of the Task Forces and Working Groups which

develop sound proposals, based on rigorous and extensive scientific analysis. This combination of solid scientific analysis and high-level access has ensured the continuing relevance and effectiveness of the China Council. In this respect, the Council is designed to bridge the gap between science and policy, an interface of critical importance, particularly in relation to climate change, as leaders must understand the new realities derived from climate science and policies must adapt to meet new challenges. As a result of 20 years of analysis and cooperation between Chinese and international experts, the Council has built up a unique body of knowledge, experience and publications and has generated worldwide networks of researchers and experts which will be of enormous value in its future work.

(5) In designing the Charter of the Council, we specifically included a “sunset clause”, a provision which ensures that, at the end of each five year phase, a specific decision must be taken to continue the Council based on an in-depth review of its goals, its operating methods and the relevance and effectiveness of its activities. This provision has ensured the constant renewal of the programme, methodology and membership of the Council and, in my view, accounts in part for its continuing vitality and relevance.

Future challenges and the role of the China Council

On this Anniversary, we are asked not only to celebrate the achievements of the Council over the past 20 years but also to look ahead. I will conclude therefore with two observations concerning the critical challenges of the future where the Council can play a valuable role.

First, there is a need for a sense of urgency. The problems and risks we face are increasing in scale and intensity in spite of all our efforts. In particular, there is an urgent need for effective action to mitigate the increasing risks of dangerous climate change and to adapt to its inevitable impacts. This critical issue, coupled with the essentially connected systemic issues of ecological degradation, energy, water and resource security, must be a focus of the Council’s future work.

Climate science, together with increasing physical evidence from across the world and a deeper understanding of the paleoclimatic record, clearly indicates that the scale of human activities, particularly of climate change emissions, runs the risk of triggering irreversible and dangerous climate change. In spite of 20 years of negotiations and substantial efforts, we are above the worst case scenario of IPCC. And the increase in emissions between 2009 and 2010 was around 6%. If we continue on this path, we are heading for a rise in global average temperature of at least 4.5° C by 2100 and most probably substantially more.



This implies double this rise in certain areas of the world. And, it is particularly important to recognize that the processes driving climate change are non-linear: we cannot therefore expect a gradual process of global warming but must prepare for sudden major changes which could have devastating consequences on the prospects for development in China and across the world. The increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events simply underlines this conclusion.

China has established a clear and coherent government-wide strategy to address the issue of climate change and has introduced strong institutional arrangements to ensure effective action. And China is making enormous, and largely successful, efforts to reduce the energy intensity of economic growth. Carbon intensity dropped by 20.8% between 2006 and 2010 according to a recent study by Tsinghua University. But over this same period, aggregate emissions rose by 33.6%. It is of course the aggregate figure which will determine whether the battle for world climate stability will be won or lost.

China is itself especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change: it follows that the successful achievement of China's strategy for development, to improve the living standards, health and happiness of the Chinese people, will depend substantially on the success of Chinese and international efforts to preserve the stability of the global climate system. Here again, economic progress and environmental protection are two sides of the same coin of sustainable development.

The leaders of China have long recognized that it is not a feasible strategy to focus first on growth and then later to address the environmental consequences. Thus, the issues of economic growth and the preservation of a viable environment and a stable climate must be integrated within one coherent overall strategy for national development. This insight is crucial to preserve the stability of the climate system and thus the prospects for China's development. Strategies to determine the content and trajectory of growth must be radically changed, together with economic and energy structures, in order to act not only on the symptoms but also on the underlying drivers of climate change. Here again, the role of the Council can be of particular importance in enhancing cooperation between China and the world to define, agree and implement urgent, substantial action to avert the risks of catastrophic climate change.

Second, we need a radical rethinking of the path of economic growth. The impacts of a world population of seven billion people today are already devastating the terrestrial and ocean ecosystems and grossly overusing the natural capital of the planet. As the world population rises to over 9 billion people in less than 40 years, it is clear that the present consumption-driven, fossil-fuel based path of economic growth is not sustainable.

It is also painfully clear today that the current models, values and strategies which have been driving economic growth as measured by GDP for the past thirty years are failing: they are stimulating excessive and unsustainable demand for material consumption; they are failing to provide millions with employment, opportunity and social justice; they are threatening to destroy the rich and fragile ecosystems of the planet which are the life-support systems of humanity; and they are destabilizing the unusually favorable climatic conditions which have allowed the development of our civilization. In spite of all our efforts, this dangerous situation continues to deteriorate. We must finally recognize that incremental change is necessary but that it is not sufficient to salvage the future.

Recovery to a business-as-usual path of economic growth will simply not be sustainable. The restructuring of the growth trajectory of the world economy to achieve equitable, inclusive and sustainable development is therefore the vital challenge of the 21st century. But to push through transformational change in any country will be a difficult task. We have seen that the pressures for consumption, supported by powerful special interests, will strongly resist the changes needed to build the new more efficient, low-carbon, green and inclusive economies of the future.

We must explicitly consider how to overcome these obstacles to progress so as to achieve a reconciliation between man and nature: between the needs and aspirations of humanity and the realities which drive and sustain the natural systems of the planet.

Fortunately, this central challenge has long been recognized by the leadership of China, first through the creation of the China Council itself and now in its commitment to reorient China's development onto a more equitable, balanced and sustainable path. This new approach is reflected in the Chinese strategy for climate change, in the "12th Five-Year Plan", in the concept of "scientific development" and in the goals and strategies of the Xiaokang Programme, aimed at achieving an all round prosperous society.

The China Council can play an important role in supporting the continuing transformation of China's development trajectory onto a sustainable path. It can clarify emerging risks and identify strategic opportunities for transformational change through in-depth analysis and sound science and present these respectfully, clearly and directly to the leadership. This will be in the essential interest of China itself and of the whole world.

And as China's role, insights and experience become increasingly important in an interdependent world which is now in a process of massive economic and political transformation, the Council can help to improve international trust and understanding



by conveying China's ideas, objectives and achievements into the wider world community.

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I am sure that all of us who have been involved in the work of the Council consider it a great honour and privilege to have been able to participate in a small way in the historic processes of China's rapid and successful development. I myself am deeply grateful to have had this opportunity to be a member of the China Council family across the world.

I wish the government and the people of China and the China Council itself continuing success in promoting international understanding, collaboration and action on the vital issues of environment and development which must be managed successfully to assure the sustainable progress of China and a prosperous and peaceful world for future generations.

Thank you.