



TOWARDS RIO + 20: Seizing the Opportunities for a Sustainable 21st Century

Keynote Speech at CCICED 20th Anniversary Forum

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Dr. Song Jian, Vice Chairpersons, Dear Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Anniversaries are very special moments and I think to all of you who are in this hall today and in the company of the founding fathers and mothers of the China Council, at a time when the world in many ways was still thinking about environment in very different terms than it is today, I would like to begin by paying my tribute to you. Because I think you have assembled in this hall here, not only from outside of China but also from within China, as pioneers in trying to change our appreciation of what it means to manage our environment more responsibly and sustainably but also to realize that there is a progression that we have also traveled, which is reflected in the history of the China Council itself.

Before I try to speak to a few of those, let me also just refer to some of the anniversaries that Doctor Song Jian also just referred to. In some ways you could say with Rio+20 next year this is also China Council Plus Twenty, because you are on the verge of opening the fifth cycle of its work. It is also just before Rio, which is a conference that in 1992 did change the conversation about development. I emphasize development because environment already then had become a driver as had the priority to address poverty and inequity. It was perhaps the first global articulation of an understanding that development cannot only be measured by economic indicators alone, that growth, even in the form of a GDP indicator defines only one dimension of development and even that dimension, as we know today, somewhat imperfectly. It is also the anniversary, as Doctor Song Jian referred to, of pioneers who in 1972 began that conversation at the global level in Stockholm, which subsequently also led to the establishment of the institution that I have the privilege to head



today, the United Nations Environment Programme. We will be celebrating the 40th Anniversary next year.

If you look back over this period, then in many ways the evolution and the history of the China Council reflects also the journey of learning and appreciation that the global community has passed through: not always in synchronicity, but certainly in many similar steps. The environmental agenda at its earlier stage was one of beginning to realize destruction in the immediate vicinity of where we lived, worked, and conducted our daily business. It was driven by a realization that the kind of pollution and habitat destruction that we were basically taking as a given in the development process was beginning to harm people, literally kill people. That is why the early age of the environmental agenda was more focused on a clean-up agenda. Subsequently, as science began to open up our understanding and our eyes, to not only the local phenomena of environmental destruction and its impacts on human well-being, but also to the fact that increasingly it became obvious that at the end of the twentieth century, humanity had managed in less than a 150 years to move from being an added biological actor in the broader eco-system, to becoming such a dominant player that we were beginning to affect the fundamental life support systems on the planet. That conscienceousness I think has been central to understanding also the incredibly rapid evolution of the environmental agenda over the last twenty years. From the atmosphere to the biosphere, to our land resources and water resources, to our oceans and fishery resources, it is an extraordinary conquest of mankind, as it would have been called perhaps thirty years ago, and today perhaps of humanity's footprint on the planet.

I often use the image of a world map where you have the world's oceans and then tell people that we have succeeded in less than 100 years to affect the resources in our world's oceans to such an extent that first of all, the oceans are warming. We are confronted with thermal expansion as a result of global warming, we are affecting the ice caps of the planet resulting in, according to the latest research, probably a sea-level rise this century of close to a meter if not more, and just a few years ago we thought the range was more like 20 centimeters to 50 centimeters. And remarkably we have managed to affect the world's fisheries to such an extent, that well over half of the world's fisheries are already at maximum level of exploitation, are declining, or are on the verge of doing so.

We face issues of food security and continue to practice agriculture in a way that historians will one day say "how blind could a society be?" Because as we try to discuss how we will try and feed those 7, 9, 10 and, low and behold, perhaps one day 15 billion people, the net balance of our agricultural systems on the planet is that we are destroying

the very foundation, the production factor called land at an unprecedented scale. Desalinization, decertification, land degradation and loss of arable soils have reached a level never before found in terms of human impact on the planet. This in part I think is the backdrop which has informed us with the scientific knowledge and also the appreciation of the empirical foundations to understand what the collective impact on the planet is, to take the environmental agenda to another level.

We have begun to talk about eco-systems, about the atmosphere, about the bio-sphere, we have looked at diversity and we have begun to appreciate that a single species may seem nothing particularly important to an ignorant human being, but to an informed and educated human being at the beginning of the twenty first century, the meaning of species extinction has taken on a very different dimension. And yet, we are going through perhaps the greatest extinction crisis in human memory and certainly in geological terms right now. This is also a reason why I believe, as we meet this year here at the China Council, we have had a conversation about the environmental aspects of development, that has progressed, that has matured, and that has taken on an entirely different dimension. We have begun to understand that at the beginning of the twenty first century, the environmental dimension of sustainable development is increasingly becoming a defining element of development, rather than a resource simply to drive it. And that is why the conversations that we have had, and I think the world has also learned through the China Council, we have learned much faster how closely linked the notions of sustainable development, social and environmental terms truly are.

As we prepare to meet in Rio next year, what is evident is that the world has articulated a paradigm for development that is highly intelligent, that links and recognizes the linkages between social equity, environmental sustainability and economic development. And we have had, and this is often difficult to explain to a world when we put the statistics of the state of the planet out, an extraordinary two decades of innovation, exploration, new ideas, new technologies, and new practices emerging. But at the end of the day, twenty years after Rio, twenty-one years after the China Council first met, we have not succeeded in really practicing what we set out for the world in 1992, and that is to manage sustainable development as three dimensional, and not as separate pillars that for much of the twentieth century were essentially in competition with one another, and almost followed a chronology of development: first economics, then social, then environmental. The fact is that many who paid the price for this are not around to tell the story because millions have been killed in the name of that logic of competition between the pillars, in every country of the world all the time.



What I think is so extraordinary about the China Council is what it has become: one of the places, one of the spaces, one of the platforms of the world. I said this yesterday already in our Council, where our conversation about development has matured over twenty years speaks to the challenge and the opportunity of the twenty first century and humanity. In yesterday's and the previous day's discussions, in terms of the task forces and directions for the future of China's development, there is a quality of thinking analysis and conversation that you will find in few other places around the world. A lot of it has to do with the people you assemble in the council, and Mr. Zhou, you have continued a tradition of inviting to the council people who will articulate innovation with responsibility, but also with an ambition to think about development differently. We have also begun to appreciate, from China's own reflections and evolution of thinking, a vision of development that is at this point in time in the new Five-Year Plan that is really quite remarkable, because it is one of the few if not the only nation that views its own development in the short term against the backdrop of a civilizational challenge. You have articulated in China the litmus test and the criteria for short term development planning in terms of the five year cycle against the backdrop of a vision of ecological civilization. To some in the world at large, hard-nosed economists, financial market operators, politicians who have to go to elections every four years or five years, this concept may seem sometimes abstract.

But, Ladies and Gentlemen, next year as we meet again in Rio, we do indeed have to confront the fact that we identified a civilizational challenge in 1992, but we have not yet found a response to meet that challenge, even in 2012. Because with all the great things that have happened in the context of sustainable development over the last twenty years and some would say thirty of forty years, the harsh bottom line is that on basically all of the major indicators of sustainability on this planet, the world is not headed in the right direction. In some respects, the world actually is accelerating in the wrong direction, whether it is carbon emissions, whether it is the world's oceans and fisheries I referred to, whether it is the challenge of feeding a hungry world, whether it is recognizing that in already 8 years time roughly one third of humanity will live in water stressed situations, or whether it is the spectrum of climate change and its, in some respects, still difficult to appreciate implications, which we will continue to debate until perhaps the "Bangkoks" are flooded every second year in 25 cities, instead of just one or two as it is right now. When almost half a nation is flooded as we saw in Pakistan last year, is this not a moment where you would expect the world to say "well maybe the IPCC is right, even if it doesn't know everything and it makes mistakes". Isn't that enough of a reason to look at a dramatic change of direction? I think the world is beginning to reach that point and that is also why

the terminology with which we now discuss sustainable development, here in the Council and worldwide is characterized increasingly by terms such as “transformation”. I think we are at a point where the concept of planetary boundaries has given us a better understanding in the last two years about what we actual mean by what a planet can sustain, that these planetary boundaries are now coming so close to the actual footprint of humanity’s economic actions that transformation is called for.

Next year’s conference in Rio is in many ways trying to catch up with the China Council, I think, has articulated many of these issues over the last few years. In that sense Minister Zhou, I would only encourage you, as you also referred to this morning Margaret, to seize the opportunity of bringing some of the lessons of China Council’s thinking to Rio. The world would benefit from it, not in terms of a Chinese model or in terms of Chinese leadership, but because of the thinking that this Council has fostered in this council over a period of two decades.

As many of you know, the summit in Rio is in a sense happening against the backdrop of exactly the opposite of what the summit is about. We are confronted by financial crises, banking crises, Arab Springs, natural catastrophes and in many ways lots of excuses for focusing on the short term rather than the long term. It was my colleague Juan Somavia, the head of the International Labour Organization, who during the financial crisis of three years ago continued to remind us that actually, there was a crisis before the crisis. That crisis before the crisis I just tried to describe in terms of a few more environmentally focused parameters, but they have their equivalent also in the social and inequity reality of this world. If we look at Rio next year, then many might say “well what can a summit on sustainable development in the year 2012 really achieve?” Perhaps we need to rethink the way we look at sustainable development, not as something that is a destination in the future, which is really the psychology of 1992, but that has become an imperative of the now in order to have a future.

In that sense, the thematic focus of the Rio conference next year, first of all in the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication is not about some distant vision about an alternative future, but it is a dramatic reflection on the need for transformation, but also a recognition that the age where individual nations and communities could determine their own well-being by determining what happens within their boundaries is long gone. Our world is condemned for the better or for the worse, to have to act collectively, and that is a fundamental principle that in some ways needs to be rediscovered. Because having now served for five years as a Senior Staff Member of the United Nations, I can tell you that I think the confidence in multinaturalism in general, but



also the belief in the ability of the United Nations to be a critical part of facilitating that collective capacity, is not at its highest level.

We are a world divided. We are a world also lacking in common objectives and purpose and orientation. We define our abilities to act by the actions of others and that in historic and civilizational terms has often been a tragic error. Whether it is in climate change negotiations in the WTO or any other forum, the notion that you move first before I move has become a recipe for paralysis. That paralysis also cements the inequity of the legacy and the present. But worst of all, it deprives us of the ability to act with a responsibility for the future.

That is why in Rio, I think there is a moment where we must ask ourselves, that is the second focus of the conference, how to govern together as a community of seven billion people divided into 193 nations, into hundreds of languages, into thousands of agendas, and into tens of thousands of reasons why my particular interests should come first. It is a moment that is civilizational in terms of the responsibility to govern, to govern with a responsibility and understanding that no nation today on its own is able to chart its own course. It is why we will look both at governance in general, the institutional framework for sustainable development we have at our disposal today, but also more specifically at the international environmental governance framework.

Here again I think the evolution of the discussion at global level shadows and reflects the discussion here in China. Many of us have been witnesses to China's decision to establish a Ministry of Environmental Protection, and many of us have had the privilege and the pleasure to work under this exceptional and dynamic Minister, Minister Zhou, its first head and a champion and pioneer for the next generation of environmental action and policy-making in China. This environmental policy-making is increasingly becoming more than just putting norms and standards and regulations in place, it is more than monitoring, it is more than enforcement; it is beginning to inform the discourse about the future opportunities and options of a nation. That is why I think we are so privileged as members of the Council, as experts, as academics and advisors to this Council to follow this discussion, because both the discussion about the transformation agenda in China and its own pathway in terms of an institutional and governance agenda have mirrored the pathway of the world. But I would suggest to you today on the occasion of this twentieth anniversary, as I have sometimes said perhaps for those who do not understand where sustainability and sustainable development agenda will move next, look to China, because here we see both the choices, dramatic choices, but also the sense of opportunity and responsibility to act.

Again in Rio, we will also reflect to some extent another issue that I have alluded to.

That is this notion of global action: the idea of introducing sustainable development goals as a framework within which the international community can look at, while monitoring and moving forward the development agenda over the coming decade is currently being discussed. I personally think it is a very interesting proposition because it recognizes that the problems, as we viewed them perhaps twenty years ago, of development, population growth, and developing countries arriving in the global economy as consumers, producers, polluters, providers and increasingly also sustainers of the global economy have shifted the entire focus of global action. In a workshop recently when we looked forward to the future role and function of the United Nations, there was a very interesting remark made by one of our colleagues. We have viewed in the last twenty years the main challenge for the world being located or centered in the global South, perhaps the world needs to begin to realize that as it looks forward there are a growing number of indicators that in fact the greatest challenge for the next twenty or thirty years may increasingly be located in the global North. That in itself begins to redefine also the parameters for global action, and it will make tectonic shifts occur in the way that we have defined and divided the world and also the multilateral agenda for the last twenty years. There is perhaps no longer that clear line between North and South, developing and developed country. There will be other alliances. There will be other realities. But certainly in looking forward, recognizing that sustainability is now really a global responsibility and one that must be acted on collectively will hopefully find its expression, also in this notion of sustainable development goals.

Doctor Song Jian, Minister Zhou, distinguished guests,

Let me end my remarks this afternoon by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to be part of this celebration here, to have served on the China Council for two periods and also to say on behalf of many of my colleagues in the United Nations system, how much we appreciate the work that all of you have done, that we have tried to contribute to, and that we hope very much that in the next phase of this Council the kinds of ideas, perspectives and lessons learned will increasingly also shape our global agenda.

Thank you.