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THE CONCEPT OF “COMMUNITY OF COMMON DESTINY”: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOR

This article seeks to explore the meaning, origins, and the content of the concept of “community of common destiny” that has become central to current foreign policy of China. On the basis of the works developed mainly by the Chinese and Western scholars, the author argues that the concept of “community of common destiny” marks the start of the new era in China’s foreign policy led by the fifth generation of Chinese leadership. After providing a thorough discussion on the concept itself the article analyzes its implications on China’s foreign policy behavior in the near future. It posits that this concept entails a more proactive foreign policy, frequent Chinese involvement in global governance issues, efforts directed towards promoting China’s positive image abroad, active engagement in regional organizations and acting as a responsible power. The article concludes that the active promotion of this new concept at major international events by the Chinese leadership demonstrates China’s willingness to act according to its growing international clout.

Key words: “community of common destiny”, global governance, proactive foreign policy, fifth generation.

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«Тағдыры ортақ жаһандық қауымдастық» тұжырымдамасы: Қытайдың сыртқы саяси жүріс-тұрысына ықпалы

Бұл мақала Қытайдың қазіргі кезеңдегі сыртқы саясатында ең негізгі орынды иеленіп отырған «тағдыры ортақ жаһандық қауымдастық» тұжырымдамасының мәні, пайда болуы және мазмұны жан-жақты зерттеледі. Мақалада автор қытайлық және батыстық зерттеушілердің еңбектеріне сүйене отырып, «тағдыры ортақ жаһандық қауымдастық» тұжырымдамасының Қытайдың сыртқы саясатында бесінші буын өкілдері жүргізіп отырған жаңа кезеңнің басталғандығын білдіретін өзгеріс ретінде көрсетеді. Тұжырымдаманың мәні және мазмұны туралы түрлі пікірлерді зерттей келе, берілген мақала оның Қытайдың сыртқы саяси жүріс-тұрысына тигізетін әсерін талдайды. Автор аталған тұжырымдаманың белсенді сыртқы саясат, Қытайдың жаһандық басқару істеріне жиі қатысуы, әлемде өзінің оң имиджін насихаттауы, аймақтық ұйымдар жұмысына белсене қатысу және жауапкершілігі мол мемлекет етінде әрекет ету сынды нәтижелерге алып келеді деп есептейді. Бұл тұжырымдаманы ҚХР басшылығының маңызды халықаралық жиындарда белсенді түрде насихаттауы Қытайдың халықаралық сахнада өзінің артып келе жатқан қуатына сай әрекет етуіне ұмтылатындығын білдіретін әрекет ретінде қорытындыланады.

Түйін сөздер: «тағдыры ортақ жаһандық қауымдастық», жаһандық басқару, сыртқы саяси белсенділік, бесінші буын.

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Концепция «сообщества единой судьбы человечества»: выводы для внешнеполитического поведения Китая

Данная статья исследует значение, причины возникновения и содержание ставшей центральной в современной внешней политике Китая концепции «сообщества единой судьбы человечества». Основываясь на работах китайских и западных исследователей, автор утверждает,

что концепция «сообщества единой судьбы человечества» обозначает начало новой эпохи во внешней политике Китая под руководством пятого поколения китайских лидеров. После обсуждения значения и содержания концепции в статье анализируется ее возможное влияние на внешнеполитическое поведение Китая. Исследование утверждает, что данная концепция влечет за собой внешнеполитическую активность Китая, а именно в решении вопросов глобального управления, усилия по продвижению позитивного имиджа за рубежом, вовлечение в региональных организациях и действие в качестве ответственной державы. Автор делает вывод о том, что активное продвижение концепции «сообщества единой судьбы человечества» китайским руководством на крупных международных мероприятиях означает желание Китая действовать в соответствии с его растущей мощью в международных отношениях.

Ключевые слова: «сообщество единой судьбы человечества», глобальное управление, внешнеполитическая активность, пятое поколение.

Introduction

With the arrival of the fifth generation of Chinese leadership in 2013 the new concept called “community of common destiny” (命运共同体 *mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ*) has highlighted a dawn of a new era in China’s foreign policy. It was new in the sense that the Chinese leadership embarked on the proactive foreign policy approach filled with elaborating a new global initiative, defending economic globalization, providing more foreign aid and loans, and sending peacekeeping troops abroad. It marked a considerable shift from previous foreign policy dictum of “hiding the capacity and biding the time” (韬光养晦 *tāoguāng yǎnghuì*) that was adopted in late 1980s as a result of Deng Xiaoping’s advice called “28-character strategy”.

Most of the observers that focus on studying the concept of “community of common destiny” agree that it is quite ambiguous in its meaning. They agree that it does not elaborate concrete actions and plans hence it is easily viewed by many as mere slogan. Moreover, this concept is not defined geographically, nor are there clearly stated institutional mechanisms, norms and principles that would regulate the interactions among states (Zhang 2018: 203, Rolland 2017:132).

Research Goals and Objectives

Taking into account a quite loose nature of this concept the goal of this paper is to explore the meaning of the “community of common destiny” and its future implications for China’s foreign policy behavior. Moreover, the objective of this study is to assess the previous Chinese foreign policy concepts, in particular the ways how they transformed themselves and the reasons for why they underwent considerable shift after a certain period of time.

Research Methodology

This is article preoccupied with the following research questions: What is the meaning of the “community of common destiny”? What kind of

major observations can we draw from this study in order to assess its implications for China’s future foreign policy behavior? In order to come up with the most compelling account for these questions, this study is based upon the qualitative research method that heavily relies on the content analysis of the texts of the speeches given by Xi Jinping in various international gatherings.

After reviewing the growing number of literature on the topic, this study finds that the concept of “community of common destiny” is quite loose and is not accompanied by concrete action plan, principles or norms. There is a consensus among authors that this concept represents an ideational or theoretical aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which constitutes the practical side of the new Chinese initiative. Furthermore, the article seeks to present major observations that would allow us to analyze the implications for China’s foreign policy behavior in the near future. It highlights that this concept entails a more proactive foreign policy, frequent Chinese involvement in global governance issues, efforts directed towards promoting China’s positive image abroad, active engagement in regional organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and ASEAN, and acting as a responsible power as it was the case with China after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. This study attempts to contribute to the existing body of literature by providing a thorough analysis on the challenges in implementing the concept.

It should be noted that “community of common destiny” and “community of shared future for mankind” are two translations of this concept thus this paper uses both versions when citing various sources.

Previous Studies: Understanding the Concept

The existing literature sheds light on the meaning and connotations of the concept of “community of common destiny”. Nadege Rolland emphasizes

an amorphous and network-based nature of this concept envisaged by the Chinese leadership compared to solid institutional frameworks that are prevalent in western societies. She also notes that it may help China create a bloc with countries that are economically dependent on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to produce a united response when faced with security threats and the one which is not directed against a third party (Rolland 2017: 132-134). In an effort to understand its meaning Rolland argues that even though this concept is designed to be inclusive in the sense that it seeks to incorporate politically, economically and culturally diverse nations, it mostly applies to Asia and China’s neighboring countries (Rolland 2017: 133).

While exploring the meaning, motives and implications of the concept of “common destiny” Denghua Zhang notes its vague meaning and loose usage in China. He argues that to Xi Jinping this concept includes five perspectives such as political partnership, security, economic development, cultural exchanges and environment. Zhang highlights that the immediate cause for initiating the concept of “community of common destiny” was the worsening territorial disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries as a tool of fence mending and mitigating regional tensions (Zhang 2018: 199). Furthermore, Zhang views this concept as a continuation of the strategy of maintaining a favorable international environment for China’s economic development thus prolonging the “period of strategic opportunities” which is considered to take the first three decades of the present century (Zhang 2018: 200). Similar to Zhang, Jian Zhang also notes that the concept of “community of common destiny” was developed in order to strengthen China’s relations with neighboring countries. He even goes on to argue that this concept reflects China’s intention to construct a China-centric regional order (Jian 2015: 15).

Wang Junsheng presents more definite meaning of this concept by alluding that the “community of common destiny” is “a core part of China’s new government’s well-designed strategy for foreign affairs”. In terms of geographical scope, he emphasizes that this concept is mainly directed towards China’s neighboring countries thus linking it to the PRC’s periphery strategy (Wang 2019: 70).

Wang Linggui and Zhao Jianglin underscore that there is a consensus among China specialists from China’s neighboring countries that the “community of common destiny” is a new paradigm that is different from the Western one and it can be “used to promote dispute resolution and socio-economic development in the world” (Wang and Zhao 2019: 3).

Stephan Smith emphasizes that the concept of “community of common destiny” is in line with the Confucian principle of harmony without sameness (和而不同 *hé ér bù tóng*) since its major focus is the Asian countries which can be characterized with plurality of political systems and diverging development levels. He points out its resemblance to the PRC’s seven decades old foreign policy principle of Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Smith 2018: 462). Similarly, Jyrki Kallio considers the “community of common destiny” as “modern spiritual offspring” of the *Tianxia* idea (Kallio 2018: 7).

According to Yan Xuetong, in 2013 China made a major shift in its foreign policy from a policy of “keeping a low profile” (善于守拙 *shànyú shǒuzhuō*) with its major focus on economic gains into “striving for achievement” (奋发有为 *fènfā yǒuwéi*) which has a greater political orientation. He argues that the idea of building communities of shared destinies with surrounding countries was declared by Xi Jinping in order to create a favorable environment for the goal of national rejuvenation of China which in turn is part of “striving for achievement” policy (Xuetong 2014: 182). Yan Xuetong does not exclude the possibility that the future community of common destiny will also include military cooperation (Xuetong 2014: 169).

Fu Ying who served as Former Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2010-2013 highlights that the idea of “community of common destiny” is designed to unite developed and developing countries, foster regional and global cooperation, and eliminate North-South division and regional imbalance in the world (Ying 2017).

Former Chinese diplomat Wang Yiwei highlights the novelty of this concept which offers “a ‘new’ approach to international relations that supersedes an ‘outdated’ model associated with the West and fosters the establishment of a new global and economic order” (Mardell 2017). Moreover, Xinhua news agency in 2017 underscored that the proposal to build “community of common destiny” “transcends ethnic, national and ideological differences as it has been designed to help countries and regions cope with global challenges” (Xinhua 2017a).

Number of authors note that the concept of “community of common destiny” and BRI are the two sides of the same coin in which “community of common destiny” constitutes an ideational or intellectual construct, whereas the BRI is practical aspect with concrete actions to be implemented (Rolland 2018, Wang 2019: 69, Kallio 2018:7).

“Community of Common Destiny” in Action

The phrase “community of common destiny” was first reflected in the 17th CPC National Congress report in 2007 expressing the PRC’s goodwill to Taiwan by stating that people on the Mainland and in Taiwan “are of the same blood and share a common destiny” (Xin 2010: 528). This notion was extended to include China’s relations with other countries in September 2011 when it first appeared in China’s White Paper on Peaceful Development and later in 18th CPC National Congress report in November 2012 (Zhang 2018: 197). Furthermore, the concept started to be actively used by Xi Jinping after he came to power. For instance, he mentioned the phrase “community of common destiny” during his state visit to Russia, Africa and at the Meeting of BRICS Leaders in 2013 (Wang 2019: 59). At the foreign affairs meeting held in 2014, Xi Jinping stated that “China’s ultimate goal was to build a ‘community of common destiny’ and that China would foster a ‘new model of international relations’ (Xiaodong 2017). Furthermore, Chinese President mentioned this concept at the 8th G20 Leaders’ Summit thus extending its audience. At this summit he encouraged the participants that “all countries should build the awareness of a community of common destiny, cooperating in competition, and achieving win-win results in cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013a). At the same time, President Xi proposed to “build Shanghai Cooperation Organization into a community of destiny and interests for its member states” and emphasizing its reliability in terms of working together and joint development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013b).

During his speech at the Indonesian Parliament Xi Jinping stressed the importance of joint efforts of Chinese and Indonesian people in building China-ASEAN community of common destiny since it meets the common interests of people of Asia and the world (China Daily 2013).

In March of 2015 Chinese leadership took a step further to introduce this concept among its Asian counterparts at the Boao Forum by delivering the speech titled “Towards a Community of Common Destiny and a New Future for Asia” in which he emphasized a growing unity among Asian countries. President Xi noted: “Over the past 70 years, Asian countries have gradually transcended their differences in ideology and social system. No longer cut off from each other, they are now open and inclusive, with suspicion and estrangement giving way to growing trust and appreciation. The interests of Asian countries have become intertwined, a community of common destiny has increasingly

taken shape” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015a).

In September 2015 the concept of “community of common destiny” was presented to the global audience as Xi Jinping’s speech at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly was titled “Work Together to Build New Partnership and Make Concerted Efforts to Build Community of Shared Mankind Destiny”. He provided some details of this concept by pointing out to its five major aspects such as political partnership, security, economic development, cultural exchange and green development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015b).

In his keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos that took place in January of 2017 Xi Jinping ardently defended economic globalization and assured that China will keep striving for the formation of “community of common destiny”. He noted that “today, mankind has become a close-knit community of shared future. Countries have extensive converging interests and are mutually dependent” (The State Council Information Office 2017). Hence, the Chinese leadership sought to stress the interdependent character of contemporary international relations.

Thus, one can easily infer that this concept has been actively promoted by the Chinese leadership at various international gatherings. According to some estimates, by the end of 2015 Xi Jinping mentioned the “community of common destiny” 70 times (Wang 2019: 60).

Moreover, during his 19th CPC National Congress report President Xi called people from “all countries to work together to build a community with a shared future for mankind, to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity” (Xinhua 2017b). As a result of the constitutional amendment of 2018 the concept has been included in the Preamble of the PRC’s Constitution: “China consistently carries out an independent foreign policy, and adheres to... open strategy in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries and promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind” (Constitution of the PRC 2018). Furthermore, this concept is given an importance in Communist Party of China (CPC) Constitution which was revised in 2017 to incorporate “Xi Jinping Thought”. These measures demonstrate the significance of this concept in China’s both internal and external affairs.

In February 2017, UN Commission for Social Development approved a resolution that encourages all countries to support Africa’s economic and social

development. In its resolution Economic and Social Council called upon “the international community to enhance support and fulfill its commitments to take further action in areas critical to Africa’s economic and social development, in the spirit of win-win cooperation and to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity” hence using China’s fifth leadership’s terminology (Resolution adopted by ESC 2017). Consequently, the Chinese Xinhua news agency reported that the Chinese diplomats regarded it as the global recognition of the concept and the manifestation of China’s contribution to global governance (Xinhua 2017a).

It should be noted that “Institute for a Community with Shared Future” was established at the Communication University of China in Beijing on November 29, 2019. It is reported that this new think tank will focus on studying the concept of “community of common destiny” (China Media Project 2019).

All these actions demonstrate that while the concept of “community of common destiny” is still in the making, it is backed by some active efforts directed towards popularizing it in the international arena and steps to elaborate and refine it domestically.

Results and Discussion: Implications for China’s Foreign Policy Behavior

What are the implications of actively promoting this concept in the world stage for Chinese foreign policy behavior? What kind of major observations can we draw from this discussion?

First, continuous promotion of “community of common destiny” implies that China will continue to be active in the international relations and even assertive in dealing with its neighbors in terms of disputed territories in particular. The introduction of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 and installing anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems in the South China Sea in April 2018 can be a powerful manifestation of this analysis (Reuters 2018).

Second, this concept will push China to be actively involved in global governance by seeking to address such issues as economic protectionism, terrorism, climate change, refugee crisis, etc. To this end, Chinese leadership will likely to adopt notions from ancient Chinese philosophers (e.g. Confucius, Mencius, Laozi etc.) that propagate cooperation, harmony, and mutual gains in order to continue to foster international solidarity despite the existing political, economic, and cultural diversity of various countries.

Third, this concept can serve as the program that is designed to promote China’s positive image

abroad since it can be argued that the concept of “peaceful rise” that was popularized by the fourth generation of Chinese leadership has not been quite successful in convincing the world of China’s good intentions. For instance, China’s assertive behavior in the South China Sea starting from 2009 had alienated China’s Southeast Asian neighbors to some extent. Therefore, “community of common destiny” has a full potential to replace previous “peaceful rise” concept.

Fourth, China will try to deploy mostly economic means in order to get support for the “community of common destiny” from both developed and developing countries. An increased foreign aid, growing investment in African countries and loans provided within the BRI framework can be a clear indication of this approach (Zhang 2018:203).

Fifth, China will try to actively promote building the “community of common destiny” within the framework of such regional groupings as the SCO, ASEAN, and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) given their composition of mainly developing countries. It should be added that the PRC is prone to identifying itself within the developing countries camp.

Sixth, Beijing will try to act responsible by all means as it continues to promote this concept since the “community of common destiny” involves the sense of responsibility as noted by Wang Junsheng. He provides President Xi’s statement from 2013 in which Chinese leader posits that “As our national power growing, China will assume more international responsibilities and obligation within its capabilities and make greater contributions to human peace and development” (Wang 2019: 67-68). Given China’s reputation that was earned after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 during which Beijing did not devalue its currency with the aim of easing financial difficulties faced by its Southeast Asian neighbors, it would not be an unexpected and sudden development. One might add China’s diplomatic and meditational efforts in providing a platform during 2003-2007 within the framework of Six-party talks to discuss and resolve nuclear crisis in the Korean peninsula.

However, there are several challenges ahead for the Chinese leadership in implementing the “community of common destiny” concept. As Zhang points out, firstly, due to their different political systems and strategic mistrust, it would be hard for China to assure the developed countries. Secondly, he stresses that it is difficult for countries to form a coalition, not to mention building a community (Zhang 2018:204). Thirdly, according to Huiyong

Wu, building the “community of common destiny” requires the creation of a holistic code of ethics. If the Confucian model is taken as the basis then it would imply that the countries outside the Confucian world would need to accept its principles. Thus, given the cultural and religious diversity of countries in the world Wu stresses the difficulty in implanting this concept. Fourthly, Wu continues to argue that another important issue with this concept is the question of promoting the inter-subjective understanding of the efficiency of such ideas as common development, win-win cooperation, and community efforts as opposed to individual freedom and individual rights that are deeply enshrined in Western way of thinking (Wu 2018: 9-10). Fifthly, Kallio argues that this concept contains some inherent contradictions. He highlights that “community of common destiny” is not suitable to be a model for a global community because it requires the existence of a center. But while China is promoting state sovereignty, it is also leaving some room for the right of powerful countries to have their own spheres of influence (Kallio 2018:7).

Overall, what we can infer from this discussion is that the countries in the world will deal with a proactive China that will act in accordance with its great power status. This will entail more Chinese involvement in global governance issues, in sending peacekeeping missions abroad, and active engagement in regional organizations coupled with other efforts within frames of BRI implementation.

Conclusion

After having considered the possible meaning, content, and the scope of the concept of the “com-

munity of common destiny” on the basis of the existing and yet growing literature on the topic, it is pertinent to note that scholarly work on the theme is continuously evolving.

The research on this topic and their findings and conclusions heavily depend upon the Chinese leadership’s foreign policy directions and announcements in the international arena. However, what we can conclude so far is that an active promotion of this concept marks the proactive Chinese foreign policy coupled with its normative dimension. This does not necessarily imply that China never had a normative content in conducting foreign policy rather this paper finds that the normative dimension of the concept of the “community of common destiny” is grander in its scale and bolder in its task. And a successful implementation of this concept will require massive political, economic, diplomatic, and academic skills from China since it has a potential to generate misunderstanding among the countries that have differ in terms of their political and cultural traditions.

Moreover, it should be noted that this concept is quite vague and loose approach in promoting regional and global cooperation among states based on their shared interests and common problems. The discussion provided by this study reveals several challenges in implementing this concept such as difficulty to convince the developed countries, form a community, elaborate holistic code of ethics and promote inter-subjective understanding. However, this study finds that the willingness of China to actively promote this concept in various international events signifies its desire to act according to its growing international clout.

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