

# Future of Global Climate Governance and China's Role Transition in the Post-Paris Era<sup>\*</sup>

*Zhang Haibin and Hu Wangyun<sup>†</sup>*

The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Paris from November 30 to December 12, 2015, resulting in the Paris Agreement and other relevant outcomes that demonstrate a critical leap forward in combating climate change, represents one of the 2015 top events in global governance. It is essential to deliberate on how it will shape the future of climate governance,<sup>1</sup> and what role China should play in the post-Paris era. These are the exact topics recently drawing fierce attention worldwide.

## I. THE PARIS CONFERENCE INITIATES A NEW PROCESS TOWARDS POST-2020 GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Half a year has passed since the Paris conference and there continues to be reflections on the event. Although some environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and scholars doubt full implementation of the Paris Agreement, especially in terms of emission reduction and adaptation,

---

<sup>\*</sup> This article is originally written in Chinese.

<sup>†</sup> Zhang Haibin is Professor at the School of International Studies and Director of the Center of International Organizations, Peking University. Hu Wangyun is a Ph.D. student of Peking University.

recognition of the conference's landmark achievement, which surely is not perfect, is still featured in mainstream appraisals. Considered from a historic point of view, the conference, in combination with its main outcomes, builds seven key blocks for new governance in the post-2020 era.

First, a new long-term objective: The Paris Agreement, based on the largest-ever consensus among sovereign nation states, manages to push humanity one huge step forward towards the ultimate objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which aims at stabilizing greenhouse gas concentration "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system". That the projected accumulated emission reduction guided by the parties' Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) is inadequate to limit global average temperature rise to "well below" 2°C is undeniable. That is why the conference, in order to further reduce climate risk, made tremendous efforts in persuading parties to make clear commitments for the first time of keeping global warming to well below 2°C and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will issue a special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways. To continuously enhance emission reduction efforts, a five-yearly "global stocktake", starting from 2023, will assess a wide range of indicators, including mitigation and finance. The global stocktake can help raise the level of ambition and close the gap between parties' practical actions and the agreement's targets. Considering the huge divergence of interests rooted in international political, economic, and ecological fluctuations and turbulences, the Paris Agreement, in clarifying the direction of enhanced mitigation actions under a new institutionalized framework, can be regarded as a fruitful accord with considerable strength and ambitious objectives.

Considered from a historic point of view, the conference, in combination with its main outcomes, ushered in a new era of global climate governance.

Second, new norms and guidelines: The idea of low-carbon, green development, which has been broadcast ever since the beginning of the 21st century, has only recently been deeply embedded by the Paris Agreement into global climate governance as the core concept. Global climate governance, in essence, is a transition from a developmental approach that relies on fossil-intensive economic growth to a low-carbon approach leading towards a de-carbonized future. However, resistance from the traditional energy sector, imperfections in the technologies and regimes in support of new energy, and, most importantly, a blurred prospect of global developmental tendencies, jointly exert a powerful counterforce that hampers the transition, making it slow and difficult to promote. The Paris Agreement, thus, breaks through in sending a clear and powerful signal across the world by demonstrating every party's concrete commitment to a green, low-carbon economy that is the inevitable choice of human beings to stay on track towards sustainable development and becomes the core idea of global climate governance.

Third, a new global mitigation order: Moving beyond the strict bifurcation between developed and developing countries adopted by the Kyoto Protocol, which requires only the former to commit to legally-binding, absolute, quantified emission reduction while encouraging the latter to conduct voluntary domestic actions based on self-disciplined commitment, the Paris Agreement, for the first time, incorporates all parties' quantified emission reduction efforts, whether relative or absolute, into a legally-binding universal framework.

Fourth, a new international emission reduction approach: The Paris Agreement demonstrates a shift of universal emission reduction pathways from top-down to bottom-up. The top-down approach, exemplified by the Montreal Protocol's success and abided by in international climate negotiations ever since it was launched in the 1990s, stresses global negotiation of objectives and appropriate division of responsibility among states. The bottom-up approach established by the Paris Agreement for post-2020 mitigation action mainly relies on parties' INDCs. The impact and reasons for this model change, and the factors that guarantee

its ultimate success, constitute valuable and necessary topics for academic research.

Fifth, new focus of international negotiation: According to the institutional arrangement of the Paris Agreement, future negotiations will focus more on practical activities and concrete policies to reduce carbon emissions on a national level, rather than the grand design of a universal, comprehensive institution on the global level, which characterized earlier efforts under the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. That is to say, post-Paris negotiations, by paying more attention to action and implementation, will link closer to and integrate more with every participating country's economic and social circumstances on the ground.

Sixth, a new governance model: The idea of multi-stakeholder cooperative governance highlighted in the Paris Agreement illustrates that cross-level civilian mobilization, instead of simply counting on central and local governments, is the fundamental driver for a more effective climate action. Recently, the efforts of cities and enterprises have become increasingly eye-catching in low-carbon development. "In 2009, green business leaders could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Today, their ranks have grown into an army," said Lars Christian Lilleholt, Danish Minister for Energy, Utilities and Climate.<sup>2</sup> The comment exemplifies the business community's entrance into the fight on the environmental side, as a result of the gradually accumulated strength of the green, low-carbon economy. The great importance attached to business and society is one of the most dramatic ideological changes in international climate negotiation.

Seventh, a new level of confidence in global governance: The conclusion of the Paris Agreement is a strong indicator to the international community that governments are willing and able to tackle global challenges collectively. Diversified problems endangering traditional and untraditional human security have brought about and quickly spread deep concerns and negative perceptions about the prospect of global governance. The Paris Agreement, by representing a hard-won achievement in climate governance that explicitly mirrors and constitutes an important

part of global governance, proves the fact that the international community, instead of staying disunited in front of global challenges, can pull together and respond strongly, which has generated a lot of useful inspiration and invaluable confidence.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of developing countries, the Paris Agreement is surely not flawless. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is weakened in terms of issues like mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and finance. Developed countries' intention to shirk responsibility has obviously increased and developing countries' divergence in interest and position has been greatly enlarged. These tendencies manifested themselves during Paris negotiations and foreshadow the arduous and long journey ahead of us.

---

A country's performance and contribution to this platform will, to a large extent, determine its international status.

The Paris conference is not the end but the beginning of a new chapter. The key to a successful deployment of the long-term strategy for low-carbon and green development is action. Though a boundless and remote road undulates ahead, two trends are certain. First, the Paris Agreement will force and boost low-carbon development in China. Second, since the Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will jointly build a climate platform, setting up fundamental rules for sustainable development for the coming 15 years, a country's performance and contribution to this platform will, to a large extent, determine its international status.

## II. THE PARIS CONFERENCE LAUNCHES THE TRANSITION OF CHINA'S ROLE IN GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE FROM ACTIVE PARTICIPATOR TO PACESETTER

China, as the world's second biggest economy and largest greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter, played a key role in getting the Paris Agreement over the finish line, and thus is highly commended for its unique, and considerable, power of influence. However,

divergent opinions exist regarding China's evaluation of its contribution and its role in global climate governance.

Internationally, the concept of leadership is frequently used to describe and define China's role in global climate governance. It was highlighted most prominently by United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on July 7, 2016, when he claimed that China has made prominent contributions to UN causes and played an important leading role in promoting sustainable global development and dealing with climate change.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government, in contrast, is very careful to avoid portraying itself as a leader. The wording President Xi Jinping used in the speech given at the opening ceremony of the Paris conference was that "China takes an active part in international cooperation on climate change."<sup>4</sup> Xie Zhenhua, China's special representative for climate change affairs, commented that "the Chinese delegation (to the Paris conference) had made an outstanding contribution" to the Paris Conference.<sup>5</sup> Whilst accepting a media interview Su Wei, Director General of Climate Change in the National Development and Reform Commission, pointed out that China, being a responsible major developing country, "is playing a constructive role in improving the global climate governance system".<sup>6</sup> In outlining China's participation in international climate cooperation, the 13th Five-Year Plan, a new economic, social and environmental blueprint for its development through 2020, demonstrates that China will further boost processes supporting deeper engagement in climate governance and greater contributions to it.

In comparison to all these statements, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin's comment during an interview with Xinhua News Agency soon after the closing of the Paris conference seems to be the most self-confident, high-profile valuation so far of China's role. According to his view, China is an "indispensably important participator in global climate governance" that "has, among developing countries, led them to collectively stay unified asserting and safeguarding their fundamental interests" during the Paris conference. Although defined with the adverbial "developing countries", his valuation is still quite rare among Chinese officials

for attributing China with the word “lead”. Because of this, it is thought-provoking that in a paper titled “China’s Contribution to Global Climate Governance” published later on *Seeking Truth*, a party-run magazine, he used “constructive guidance” instead of “leadership”<sup>7</sup> so that scruples about the word “lead” were dispelled.

This underlines apparent divides in appraisals of China’s role in global climate governance between the Chinese government, which prefers the self-image of a participator, and the international community which expects China to engage more as a leader. The reasons for this difference are as follows. First, there are various definitions of leadership: In international relations theories, leadership relates to hegemony and domination. The latter two can be regarded as “preponderant influence or authority over others, or even hierarchical and leader-member relations in certain regimes” by which the dominator can ignore other actors’ opinions when controlling them, while the other actors should take into

---

This underlines apparent divides in appraisals of China’s role in global climate governance between the Chinese government, which prefers the self-image of a participator, and the international community which expects China to engage more as a leader.

consideration at all times the dominator’s preference and action.<sup>8</sup> Leadership essentially is an asymmetric relationship between leaders and followers, in which one actor throughout a certain period of time guides or directs the behavior of others towards a certain goal.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, on the one hand, resource capabilities and the willingness of the leader to lead, on the supply side, are imperative for effective leadership. On the other hand, the demand for leadership and the recognition of prospective followers on the demand side are also critical for a leadership relationship to come into existence. After all, to shape collective behavior in a group in alignment with its own preference a leader needs to persuade the others, so it should, at first, be regarded as a leader prior to actually leading.<sup>10</sup> However, leadership, hegemony and

domination usually go together despite their conceptual differences. For example, the United States, as the hegemonic power, declares safeguarding its global leadership as the core objective of its global strategy and this has given rise to China's negative interpretation of and disinclination towards leadership based on the stance of pursuing and adhering to an independent foreign policy.

In the field of addressing climate change, there coexist various kinds of leadership. Four ideal-typical models of leadership can be identified according to leading strategy: structural leadership, directional leadership, idea-based leadership, and entrepreneurial leadership.

The main and most powerful leadership strategy in international negotiations is based on the structural power of an actor.<sup>11</sup> Structural leadership can provide selective incentives and change the cost-benefit structure in a particular area resting on the leader's resources, wealth, political power and the ability to take actions. As a result, they infuse finance, technical resources, and political impetus into mitigation and adaptation actions, casting wide influence over the whole procedure of climate governance from agenda setting, communication and negotiation, to execution and implementation; thus shaping the international political and economic system for tackling climate change.<sup>12</sup>

Directional leadership rests on demonstrating commitments, adopting effective domestic policies and fulfilling promises by strong unilateral action. Therefore, a model with strong determination that others may want to emulate is provided, and uncertainty about collective action is reduced following an increase in the accountability of the leader.<sup>13</sup>

Idea-based leadership is indispensable in scientific research, problem identification, conception naming, goal setting, and direction guidance. This type of leadership features winning support from the international community with its scientific arguments, and researching discoveries for its proposals about objectives, agenda, policy and international collective action.

An entrepreneurial leader seeks to influence the manner in which problems are presented in the context of political bargaining and to fashion mutually acceptable deals through trade-offs, thus bringing



willing parties together in reaching a fair, satisfying outcome. Diplomacy, negotiation tactics, and skills in agenda setting, publicity, and creative resolution of problems are therefore of great importance.

Practically, when people talk about climate leadership they are actually focusing on different aspects of the concept, which, through discreet contemplation, may be found by referring to specific leading strategies and models.

Second, distinct perceptions of China's national circumstances: Ranking after the 80th position on the World Bank list of countries by GDP per capita and thus facing an arduous development task, China has been sticking tightly with its developing country identity<sup>14</sup> rather than proclaiming leadership, which requires powerful support from a prosperous economy and vigorous scientific and technological strength. The international community, and especially some Western countries, however, in consideration of China's status as the world's second-biggest economy, largest importer and exporter, and owner of the largest foreign exchange reserve, regards China more as a potential, qualified global leader than a normal developing country.

Third, different intentions of using the concept: While calling China a global leader, Western countries are actually trying to stimulate China to shoulder more international responsibilities in a way where they do not have to sacrifice by relinquishing proportional rights, discourse, or influence over it. And this is exactly what concerns China; crowned with a false reputation it may have to enter into an overwhelming commitment incommensurate with its developmental level and capacity that, in the end, may possibly overdraw its strength.

The fourth point relates to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It is developed countries that are required to "take the lead" in committing themselves to emission reduction, and providing new and additional financial resources and technical support for developing countries. These special commitments from developed parties constitute the core element of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities guiding North-South cooperation, which, nevertheless, may become

impaired once China crosses the line of declaring itself a leader.

Aware of the obvious complexity and sensitivity in discussing China's role in the transition of global climate governance that is revealed in the above theoretical analysis, it is necessary in the next part to examine the issue from the Chinese perspective where the word "leader" is substituted by "emerging leader" according to Chinese tradition in daily expression and political wording.

According to recent research, China has been an increasingly active participator in climate governance ever since it joined international climate negotiations in 1990.<sup>15</sup> The Paris Conference of 2015 prominently and formally represented China's evolution from a participator to a pacesetter.

Who can be a pacesetter? Taking into account the four aforementioned models, a participator that simultaneously meets the following five conditions can be regarded as a pacesetter: (1) the idea-based ability to name issues and set the agenda; (2) the managing ability to break gridlock in negotiation at crucial moments through coordination; (3) the directional ability to inspire and encourage others to march forward on a track of low-carbon economic development by example; (4) adequate strength and resources in support of international climate cooperation especially through foreign aid; (5) the acceptance and recognition by the international community which is evidenced by appreciation by the mainstream.

These conditions constitute a fundamental analytical framework for the assessment of China's endeavors in the Paris conference.

First, China's propositions for tackling climate change are progressively welcomed and valued by other parties, including forging a community of shared future for mankind, promoting ecological progress, protecting developing countries' fundamental rights in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, and upholding climate justice.

Second, China has facilitated the forging of compromises between developed countries and developing countries, enabling them to reach mutual understanding on critical issues. Before the Paris conference, China had signed two joint statements on climate change with the United States and another with France. In these

statements, consensus was obtained on several key issues, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and transparency, thus removing critical obstacles in international negotiation. As a result, the way for the historic success of the Paris Agreement was paved. Equally important were the frequent face-to-face meetings between Xie Zhenhua, head of the Chinese delegation, with other leaders, such as Laurent Fabius, Ban Ki-moon and John Kerry, and the suggestions raised by Xie on behalf of China.<sup>16</sup>

Third, in terms of ecological endeavors to promote green, circular and low-carbon growth, China has integrated climate change efforts into its medium- and long-term program of economic and social development. Attaching equal importance to mitigation and adaptation, China is trying to make progress on all fronts by resorting to legal and administrative means, technologies and market forces. The quantity of China's accumulated energy savings between 1990 and 2010 accounts for 58% of the global total. So far, China has installed a capacity of renewable energy that accounts for 24% of the world's total, with the newly installed capacity accounting for 42% of the global total, making it first in the world in terms of energy conservation and utilization of new and renewable energies.<sup>17</sup> Its INDCs, formally submitted on June 30, 2015, outlined China's goals through the period of 2020-2030 along with corresponding Chinese government pledges to peak its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2030 and by 2030, reduce CO<sub>2</sub> per unit of GDP by 60-65% of 2005 levels, raise the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to about 20% and increase forest stock by around 4.5 billion cubic meters over 2005.<sup>18</sup> China's ambitious objectives and strenuous domestic efforts have galvanized global action by setting a good example.

Fourth, the Chinese government has earnestly fulfilled its commitments to international cooperation and foreign aid in support of developing countries regarding climate change. Since 2011 China has provided RMB410 million to help about 10 countries with infrastructure improvements and capacity building to battle climate change. President Xi Jinping announced in September 2015 the establishment of a RMB20 billion South-South

Climate Cooperation Fund and the launch of cooperation projects, in line with the Paris conference, to set up 10 pilot low-carbon industrial parks and start 100 mitigation and adaptation programs in other developing countries, and provide them with 1,000 training opportunities on climate change. This unprecedented endeavor in support of developing countries is not only rare throughout Chinese history but also comparable to major Western countries' effort.

Fifth, the universal recognition of China's contribution was highlighted by US President Obama and French President Hollande's appreciation and comments that the Paris Agreement would be unachievable without China's support, as well as compliments from Ban Ki-moon on China's unique influence. The inclination to applaud Chinese leadership is also shown in Western mainstream media, which completely contradicts the one-sided and overwhelming criticism of China after the Copenhagen conference.

It is concluded that China has shown, during the Paris conference, preliminary qualities of a global pacesetter in combating climate change. Therefore, the Paris conference can be considered a significant chapter in China's climate diplomacy and a turning point in China's role in climate governance. It is important to realize that the transition should be a process rather than a point in time.<sup>19</sup> After all, to forge iron, one must be strong. It will take China 10-15 years to fully enhance economic, scientific and technological strength, boost low-carbon development, substantially cut down GHG emissions, and build up innovation capabilities and multilateral diplomatic skills. When possessing all these qualifications, China can really act as a global pacesetter.

### III. CONCLUSION

Against the background of a highly complex global situation where the international political structure is undergoing a profound readjustment, the global governance system is at the turning point of transformation, and China, with over one billion inhabitants, is engaging in global governance at an unprecedented level. That is the reason why both China and the international community

are seriously considering the potential outcome brought by China's rise. The Chinese government has sincerely promised that the rise of China will be a blessing instead of a misfortune to mankind because of its peaceful nature. Through full engagement in global governance, China will help build a more equal and just governance system and make the world a better place. However, it is impossible to be an all-round guide in global governance, no matter how determined and diligent China is. Therefore, climate governance, as an integral part of global governance and the area with the highest possibility for breakthrough towards a brand-new effective governance system, should be considered the best platform for China to become a pacesetter and prove its positive influence on peaceful development.

---

<sup>1</sup> Global climate governance has a richer connotation than international negotiation, but the latter is the core of the former. As such, they are mixed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Zhongsheng, "China's Role in Guiding Global Climate Governance", *People's Daily*, December 8, 2015, p3. Also see, Lars Christian Lilleholt, "The Copenhagen-Paris Express", <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/un-climate-change-paris-copenhagen-by-lars-christian-lilleholt-2015-12>.

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua News Agency, "Xi Jinping Meets with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of UN", July 7, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-07/07/c\\_1119182815.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-07/07/c_1119182815.htm), accessed July 15, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping, "Work Together to Build a Win-Win, Equitable and Balanced Governance Mechanism on Climate Change", speech at opening ceremony of Paris climate summit, November 30, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/1201/c1024-27873625.html>, accessed July 3, 2016.

*Future of Global Climate Governance and  
China's Role Transition in the Post-Paris Era*

<sup>5</sup> State Council Information Office, "Talking about Climate Change after Paris Conference", China and Foreign Media Conference, Xinhua News Agency, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/live/20151223x/index.htm>, accessed July 5, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Changyan Ma, "Raising Three Inspirations for Climate Governance Future, Xi Jinping Outstands China's Responsible Image", China Economy, [http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201512/04/t20151204\\_7301990.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201512/04/t20151204_7301990.shtml), accessed July 5, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Zhenmin Liu, "China's Contribution to Global Climate Governance", *Seeking Truth*, 2016(7): 57.

<sup>8</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1981, pp. 242-254.

<sup>9</sup> Steinar Andresen and Shardul Agrawala, "Leaders, pushers and laggards in the making of climate regime", *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2002, pp. 41-51.

<sup>10</sup> Christer Karlsson, Charles Parker, Mattias Hjerpe, and Björn-Ola Linnér, "Looking for Leaders: Perceptions of Climate Change Leadership among Climate Change Negotiation Participants", *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2011, pp. 89-107.

<sup>11</sup> Inés de Águeda Corneloup, Arthur P. J. Mol, Small Island Developing States and International Climate Change Negotiations: The Power of Moral "Leadership" [J], *Int Environ Agreements*, 2014(14): 281-297.

<sup>12</sup> Christer Karlsson, Mattias Hierpe, Charles Parker and Björn-Ola Linnér, "The Legitimacy of Leadership in International Climate Change Negotiations", *Ambio*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2012, pp. 46-55; Sebastian Oberthür and Claire Roche Kelly, "EU Leadership in International Climate Policy: Achievements and Challenges", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2008, pp. 35-50.

<sup>13</sup> Charles F. Parker, Christer Karlson, Mattias Hjerpe and Björn-Ola Linnér, "Fragmented Climate Change Leadership: Making Sense of the Ambiguous Outcome of COP-15", *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2012, pp. 268-286.

<sup>14</sup> Xinhua News Agency, "During the 7th Collective Learning of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC, Xi Jinping stresses the importance of building a more equitable, just and effective architecture of global governance and creating favorable conditions for Chinese Development and World Peace", [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-10/13/content\\_2946293.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-10/13/content_2946293.htm), accessed June 5, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Haibin Zhang, "China and International Climate Negotiation", *The Journal of International Studies*, 2007(1): 21-36.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Zhenhua Xie on January 18, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Zhenmin Liu, "Chinese Contribution in Global Climate Governance", *Seeking Truth*, 2016(7): 57.

<sup>18</sup> Full text of President Xi's speech at opening ceremony of Paris climate summit, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/01/content\\_22592469.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/01/content_22592469.htm).

<sup>19</sup> Some Chinese scholars think that China is already a leader or guide. The difference between their opinion and ours may lie in different conceptions of leadership or their exaggeration about China's influence.