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## **The “Community with a Shared Future”: China’s Order of “Harmonious” Relations**

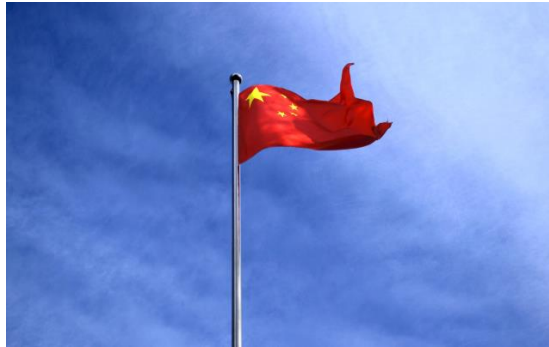
*Henrick Tsjeng*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*China’s “community with a shared future” – President Xi Jinping’s signature vision for a global order – is deeply embedded in Beijing’s multilateral diplomacy, as shown in recent Chinese engagements with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism. What does such a “community” entail for small and medium-sized countries when they engage with China?*

### **COMMENTARY**

At the forefront of China’s multilateral diplomacy towards small and medium-sized countries is its all-out push of the “[community with a shared future](#)” – Chinese President Xi Jinping’s signature vision for a future global order. China’s most recent engagements in Central and Southeast Asia amply demonstrate this vision at work. The pattern is clear: emphasise cooperation with China’s partners and sweep all tensions and issues under the rug, while expecting its counterparts to do likewise.



Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision for a future global order – "community with a shared future" – might require countries to adopt a more flexible diplomacy with China in order to retain ties while upholding their own national interests. *Image from Pixabay.*

## **A Chinese-led Order of Carrots and Sticks**

China seeks to promote a new kind of international order – one in which Chinese preferences for "harmonious" interstate relationships and the respect for sovereignty are the norm. The document "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions", [released](#) by China's State Council Information Office in September 2023, makes clear that China's vision "stands on the right side of history and on the side of human progress. It introduces a new approach for international relations, provides new ideas for global governance ... and draws a new blueprint for a better world."

Compared to the US-led order where "[s]ome countries' hegemonic ... actions against others ... are causing great harm", the document proclaims that "China has been committed to fulfilling its role as a responsible major country, pushing for the resolution of international and regional flashpoints". It stresses that China stands ready to lead a "better" global order, respecting countries' sovereignty and governance preferences.

When it comes to territorial disputes, the key source of friction between China and its neighbours, the document glosses over the subject by simply mentioning that the way forward would be to peacefully manage and resolve disputes through "dialogue and consultation". What is left unsaid is that any country that falls out of line by directly confronting Beijing or bandwagoning with the United States can expect reprisals.

This view of how "harmonious" international relations should be conducted is strongly reflected in China's approach to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism.

## **The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation**

In early July, Xi travelled to Kazakhstan, where he also attended the 24th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO. The [Astana Declaration](#) furnished a long list of accomplishments and commitments by the SCO and affirmed that member states formed "a shared vision of the idea of creating a community of common destiny for mankind", a formulation clearly pushed by China and endorsed by all SCO member states.

However, there were obvious issues missing from the discussions. Bilateral spats were left out, such as the ongoing China-India and India-Pakistan tensions, apart from

a vague affirmation by member states of their commitment to peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue. In a [sideline meeting](#) between Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and his Indian counterpart, S. Jaishankar, in Astana, the former insisted on “properly handling ... the situation in the border areas, while actively resuming normal exchanges” – demonstrating China’s attitude that disputes are best shelved.

### **The Mekong Sub-region**

In August, Wang visited Thailand, where he co-chaired the 9th LMC Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. As with the SCO meeting, the [joint press communiqué](#) issued at the end of the LMC meeting stated that the member states had agreed to jointly build “a Community of Shared Future of Peace and Prosperity among Lancang-Mekong Countries”.

While the meeting garnered little attention in international media outlets, Wang was reported in China-based media to have pushed for cooperation in various fields beyond riparian and environmental issues that the LMC is traditionally associated with, [such as](#) capacity building in artificial intelligence and digitalisation.

Predictably, controversial issues were sidestepped. Although sustainable management of water resources and dam safety were discussed, neither the meeting documents nor the joint press communiqué mentioned the negative impacts of China’s [dam building](#) in the upper sections of the Mekong. Nor was there any such mention in the official media of member countries.

Moreover, with the attendance of Myanmar’s junta-appointed [foreign minister](#) – who has been barred from attending high-level ASEAN meetings – the LMC meeting acted as if nothing was amiss in the country, nor was there any mention of how the civil war might impact Myanmar’s section of the Mekong. Importantly, just before the LMC meeting, Wang visited [Naypyidaw](#), where he expressed friendship and support for the junta leaders.

### **What a “Shared Future” with China Entails**

Harmonious relationships, in China’s view, should consist of cooperation for mutual benefit, while bilateral tensions and difficulties should be set aside and preferably out of sight. This in practice also means that other countries, no matter big or small, should never make China “[lose face](#)” in the international arena, or confront it on issues seen to be impinging on its core interests. To criticise or confront Beijing is to invite varying levels of Chinese retaliation, depending on the severity of the infringement.

Should any country go too far, such as by inviting US support in any bilateral territorial dispute with China – a matter that Beijing is highly sensitive about – China may impose measures beyond economic retaliation, including harassment by military and law enforcement authorities, as [the Philippines](#) has recently experienced in the South China Sea.

Other countries too have experienced “punishment”. In 2017, South Korea faced Chinese [boycotts and unofficial sanctions](#) after its decision to deploy the THAAD anti-ballistic missile defence system. In 2010, Beijing blocked exports of rare earths to

Japan to [coerce](#) the country into releasing the captain of a Chinese fishing vessel who had been arrested after a collision in waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea.

On the other hand, China is far more conciliatory towards countries that pay due respect to, and make concessions in favour of, Chinese interests, even when confronted with contentious bilateral disputes, as can be seen in the SCO or LMC. The Mekong sub-region countries often do not voice their concerns regarding the upstream dams constructed by China, with China often providing them with infrastructure investments and proclamations of friendship in return.

Similarly, when Chinese authorities began their harsh crackdown against the ethnic Uyghur population in Xinjiang – which also resulted in the detention of ethnic Kazakhs – neighbouring Kazakhstan, unwilling to anger China, chose to [stay silent](#). In return for this silence, Astana has been [given](#) assurances that Beijing will respect Kazakhstan's sovereignty as well as continued investments through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

It is possible for a country to get away without being “punished” for perceived infractions against Beijing's interests if the overall relationship is carefully managed by giving “face” to China in other areas, as [Vietnam has done in recent months](#). Hanoi has [agreed](#) to support China's vision of “a community of shared future” and [signed](#) numerous cooperative agreements with Beijing. These steps took place alongside Hanoi's elevation of its relationship with the United States to a [comprehensive strategic partnership](#), its [pushback](#) against China's overlapping maritime claims, and, most recently, its deepening of ties, including in the defence and military arenas, [with the Philippines](#).

### **Engagement with China Will Only Get Tougher**

Vietnam has shown that it is possible for small and medium-sized countries to manage China's assertiveness through flexible diplomacy, but doing so will be a major challenge that regional countries, especially those that are treaty allies with the United States, will have to struggle with.

One way they could do so would be to engage with Beijing through multilateral institutions not led by China, such as ASEAN or the Mekong River Commission, but doing so is easier said than done, especially if [Chinese influence](#) over these institutions continues to grow or if Chinese-led institutions [overshadow](#) them. In the years ahead, small and medium-sized countries will need careful management and balancing in their relations with China as they uphold their own national interests.

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