

## **Fight the “Five parallel Disasters” and Get out of the Swamp of Global Development**

Wang Wen

**H**uman development is now in the throes of the worst situation since the end of the Second World War, just like falling into a swamp, beset by the difficulties of regional conflicts, economic recession, food crisis, spread of viruses and climate change. The path towards the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has hugely deviated from expectations in terms of targets. China, with steady achievements in development and the best record among developing countries in meeting the SDGs, has experience that can be of help for many countries. There is an urgent call for mankind to set new comprehensive development goals for 2050.

### **Global Development Bogged Down in the Worst Swamp Since the End of World War II**

Not many have realized that the development challenges facing mankind in the third decade of the

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21st century are greater than any time since the end of World War II. The five major disasters affecting the development process in human history, namely, war, virus, climate change, recession, and famine, are unprecedentedly taking place all at the same time. Human development has been severely hamstrung, just like being trapped into a swamp.

The five parallel disasters has thrown human development into a marshland, where any move is impossible. Even worse, the more the floundering, the quicker death could come. The situation demands serious attention.

The first category of disasters is war. The Ukraine crisis is a war with the biggest death toll since the Second World War, and casualties might well have exceeded one million, more than any one of the wars on the Korean Peninsula and in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. This war has been going on for three years, only expanding instead of showing any sign of coming to an end. At the same time, the Palestine-Israel conflict is getting more intense with no sign of reconciliation at all. What's worse, according to the data collected by the Uppsala University of Sweden, the year 2023 saw more conflicts than any time since 1946, with 59 conflicts in 34 countries. As pointed out in *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946-2023* by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the three most violent years in terms of direct casualties from State-based armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War have been 2021, 2022 and 2023. These wars have led to the regression of development in many parts of the world, which is truly a big concern. However, the western-dominated international political logic of power-based realism has not been helpful in preventing things from getting worse.

The second category of disasters is virus. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have been forgotten by many, but in fact, virus still poses an ongoing crisis. Covid-19, which started in 2020, claimed at least 10 million lives. It is the most fatal virus since the Great Spanish Flu in 1918, but it is definitely not the last. Globalization in the flow of people and goods has hugely accelerated the spread of virus. In the summer of 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report, listing over 30 viruses and bacteria that may cause global public health emergencies. Even worse, virus mutation now far outpaces antibiotics development. The crisis, in essence, is a crisis for the poor. The rich can cope with virus infection through physical isolation and quality medical care, while the poor have no choice but to face death. That is a new variable in the crises experienced by mankind in its development, thus an urgent call for all countries to develop better and more extensive social security and medical insurance systems.

The third category of disasters is famine. As indicated in the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024* jointly issued by multiple organizations under the UN framework, Covid-19 has aggravated the global food crisis. In 2023, around 2.33 billion people were moderately or severely food insecure, especially in most parts of West Asia, the Caribbean and Africa where hunger is on the rise. In Africa, one out of five suffers from hunger. According to the *Global Report on Food Crises 2024*, nearly 282 million people in 59 countries and territories experienced high levels of acute hunger in 2023 - a worldwide increase of 24 million from the previous year. Actually, the global agriculture production capacity is enough to achieve the goal of “zero hunger”, but failure in regional coordination and international cooperation has made famine worse and worse. One cannot help but admit that this is a

new tragedy in human development and also an alert for us to find more effective and practical solutions to the famine and poverty find that exist extensively in under-developed countries.

The fourth category of disasters is climate change. The *Stern Review* published in 2006 predicted that global climate change may become the most deadly and far-reaching threat, just like the two world wars and the Great Depression in the United States. That prediction is coming true. In 2024, Secretary General Gutierrez of the United Nations issued “a global SOS”, urging all governments to intensify climate actions. According to the report issued in early August by the Copernicus Climate Change Service, the EU’s climate watchdog, July 2024 was the second-warmest month globally in its data record since 1940, with July the 22nd and 23rd being the hottest days ever recorded in history. Global warming is posing greater threats to human development, such as rising sea levels, shortage of food and water resources, increasing diseases, and economic losses. The global average sea level is rising at a rate unprecedented in the past 3,000 years. Obviously, human development is confronted with climate challenges unseen in history, pressing all countries to honor the commitments made in the Paris Agreement in 2020 on low carbon development.

The fifth category of disasters is economic recession. The “secular stagnation” theory has reemerged after being popular in the 1930s. Global economic growth from 2020 to 2023 was just 2.3%, the most sluggish four years since GDP was recorded after World War II. Global inflation reached a 30-year record of 8.1% in 2022, while in most countries, nominal salary growth trailed consumer price rises, leading to actual income loss of citizens at the bottom. In 2023, global investment growth rate, measured in

actual total fixed capital formation, was expected to slow from 3.3% in 2022 to 2%, much lower than the average 4% between 2011 and 2019. The main reason lies in the general sluggish investment in developed economies. High debt burdens and interest payment and shrinking fiscal space will also continue to seriously constrain public sector investment. Global trade in goods was down by 5.1% in 2023. In 2024, global trade, especially trade in goods, will remain strained and continue the trend of negative growth due to weak global demand, monetary tightening and trade tensions. These bad economic figures have cast more shadow over the prospects of human development, a reminder to all countries that economic growth should still top the development agenda.

Obviously, the five parallel disasters are exerting enormous impacts on the 17 SDGs with 169 specific targets identified by the United Nations in 2015 to be achieved by 2030, severely setting back the process of realizing the grand vision and making it go awry. That should confine prompt more scholars to reflect on the past practices and experiences of global development. China, a big developing country least impacted by the five parallel disasters and with the best performance in meeting the SDGs, is going beyond the confines of Western centralism with its decades-long development achievements, which deserves careful study by all countries.

### **Five Aspects of Development Experience of Chinese Modernization**

In the face of the dire situation of global development, every country should rise to the occasion and think how one can make its contributions as needed for reversing the fortunes of humankind.

China has no intention to be a “lecturer” about where the world should go, but in view of the persistent misunderstanding, distortion and smearing of China’s development by quite a few western media outlets, think tanks and politicians, it is necessary for China to tell the true story about its modernization process in a more systematic manner, to set the record straight and offer useful experience and lessons for global development, which has been undermined by the ongoing five parallel disasters.

**First, China is advancing the modernization and development process that benefits the largest population in the world, offering the world experience for large-scale development.**

The United Kingdom had a population of about five million when achieving modernization in the 19th century, while the United States had a population of around 80 million when modernized in the 20th century. Over the past 300-plus years since the start of industrial revolution, the combined population of the countries that have entered the development stage of modernization has totaled 900 million. The 45 years of reform and opening-up in China has taken 1.4 billion people collectively onto the path toward modernization, which reflects a larger scale effect of Chinese modernization than that of the West.

Chinese modernization with a huge population provides significant experience for global development. China has worked hard to engage one billion workforce in industrial production, providing enough employment opportunities. And as a result, it has eradicated absolute poverty and created a larger scale of consumer market. That is something valuable for many underdeveloped countries with large populations to draw upon. In this process,

with investment in infrastructure, especially a booming real estate market and improved roads, railways, and communications infrastructure, the advance of urbanization has become particularly crucial. Over a short span of 45 years, the ratio of urbanized population in China rose from about 17% to 66%. This urbanization process is people-centered, as it meets the diverse needs of the huge population for healthcare, education, elderly care, security, food, tourism, and so on. Development on such a large scale offers not only useful experience for many countries but also helps to stem the current challenges of famine and poverty.

**Second, China is advancing the modernization and development process that prevents rich-poor gaps, offering the world relevant experience for balanced development.**

China, now with a 400 million middle-income population, has become a middle-income country. China has also built the world's largest systems of education, social security, medical healthcare. The nine-year compulsory education reaches 95.7% of the population, basic pension insurance covers almost 1.1 billion people, and medical insurance has over 1.3 billion subscribers. To narrow the regional gaps, China's central government fiscal support is consistently tilted towards regions with difficulties in development and underdeveloped regions, with priority given to livelihood expenditures that are inclusive, fundamental and meet basic needs in education, health care, and other areas, to lay a solid foundation for common prosperity.

In recent years, the popularization of take-out, on-line ride hailing, e-commerce, express delivery and other new business forms of the digital economy has enabled the mid-and-low-income

people to enjoy convenient services. That is a great advance in the equalization of social services, to see that the benefits of development reach each and every individual as much as possible. The common prosperity that China aims at is not the absolute evening up of incomes, but the maximum popularization of development outcomes and minimum negative consequences from absolute free competition. This can also be of reference for western countries that have long been influenced by social Darwinism.

**Third, China is advancing the modernization and development process that features both material and cultural-ethical abundance, offering the world relevant experience for coordinated development.**

Material abundance may sometimes cause cultural decadence, as illustrated by the internal cultural wars, loss of faith and cross-gender distortion in some western countries. Chinese modernization and development seeks to achieve material progress and cultural-ethical progress in a coordinated and mutually reinforcing way, by promoting fine movies, TV programs, theater, radio drama, books, and other artistic and literary works. This will enrich people's cultural life, help shape core values, and cultivate mainstay social values of breaking new ground and pursuing an uplifting life.

China has now become the world's largest cultural industry producer of movies, books, TV series, cartoons and animations, with the number of both box offices and screens exceeding the United States and with more registered social volunteers than any other country in the world. That fully shows the true picture of cultural and ethical progress in China. "People have ideals,



the country has strength, and the nation has a bright future” has become the totem of the Chinese modernization path towards both material and cultural-ethical prosperity and is also a source of inspiration for increased cultural soft power of China. More and more international polls have demonstrated that the reputation of China’s national image is rising rapidly, providing a positive boost to the developing countries in promoting coordinated social development.

**Fourth, China is advancing the modernization and development process that promotes coexistence of humanity and nature, offering the world relevant experience for harmonious development.**

The largest ever actions in human history for carbon and emissions reduction are taking place in China. Committed to the principle that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets”, China tops the world in multiple areas of green development, and is a leader and pioneer for global green development in reality as well as in name. China has become the world’s largest green finance market. By the end of the first quarter of 2024, local-currency and foreign-currency green credit balance reached 33.77 trillion yuan, up by 35.1% year on year, much higher than any other country. China is also the largest market of clean energy stock and increment. In 2023, new photovoltaic installed capacity was 216.3 gigawatts, up by 147.5% year on year, being the world’s number one for 11 years consecutively. In 2023, China’s wind power market registered 79.37 gigawatts in new installed capacity with a year-on-year increase of 59.3%, taking up 60% of the global total. China is also a leader in new energy industry export, the largest exporter of clean power generation

parts and raw materials, and the world's top exporter of new energy vehicles.

China is working on the integrated protection and systematic management of mountains, waters, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands and deserts, and promoting a green growth with less carbon emissions and pollution. It is exploring a new modernization path towards harmony between humanity and nature that prioritizes ecological protection and resources conservation, and pursues green and low-carbon development. Guided by the idea that “humanity and nature are one community of life”, China has made the important commitments of carbon peaking by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060, striving to transition from carbon peaking to carbon neutrality faster than ever before in world history. This new development philosophy transcends the human-centrism outlook on nature and the “pollute first, clean up later” outlook on environmental protection, and contributes new wisdom and impetus to the global solutions to green development and climate change.

**Fifth, China is advancing the modernization and development process that seeks win-win cooperation instead of war, offering the world relevant experience for peaceful development.**

In the past nearly half a century, China has been the only one of the major economies that has neither launched nor engaged in a war, the only one of the major countries that has enshrined commitment to the path of peaceful development in its Constitution, the largest peacekeeper contributor among the permanent members of the UN Security council. It is the only country of the nuclear-weapon countries that has promised not to

be the first to use nuclear weapons and not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries, and the one major country that has joined the most existing international treaties and organizations. The tragic history of being bullied and humiliated by foreign powers and the historical lesson that “hegemony preludes decline” have taught China that peace, as a priority, is an important external guarantee for its modernization drive.

What has happened shows that no country can truly maintain a positive development momentum over the long run by way of wars and conflicts. China has worked to uphold the World Trade Organization (WTO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and other multilateral mechanisms, and advance the Group of 20 (G20), BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China has signed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation agreements with over 150 countries, and facilitated the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran and promoted peace talks between Russia and Ukraine in recent years. China has been organizing the China International Import Expo and the China International Fair for Trade in Services in recent years. These are all part of China’s efforts to maintain world peace, share development opportunities with other countries, promote international macroeconomic policy coordination, and foster an international environment conducive to the common development of all countries. These efforts have helped promote stability and tranquility in a world frequented by wars and conflicts, and bring valuable hope for stemming the undesirable trends in global development.

## **Plan for Comprehensive Human Development for 2050**

The analysis of China's development experience helps refocus the direction and path of global development. China has formulated the grand goal of building a strong, modernized socialist country in an all-round way by 2050, a year significant also for global development. As we approach 2030 which is set for reaching the SDGs, setting the Comprehensive Development Goals (CDGs) 2050, new goals for global development, should be a matter of urgency now. In alignment with this purpose, on October 19, 2024, the second Tongzhou Global Development Forum in Beijing hosted by the Renmin University of China released the report titled "*Humanity 2050: Comprehensive Human and Social Development*".

The "comprehensive human and social development" is inspired by the concept of "sustainable development". The "sustainable development" concept was first initiated by the UN in 1987, and then defined in the report "*Our Common Future*" as "the ability to make development sustainable - to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". "Comprehensive human and social development" indicates the long-term nature of sustainable development and also addresses the extensive nature of development. Such development seeks to meet both the current and future needs of contemporary people and those of human groups, such as societies and countries.

"Sustainable development" focuses on the future of mankind, advocates sustainable approaches to consumption

and production and to the management of natural resources on earth. “Comprehensive human and social development” stands for a path of green and high-quality development, and also the coordinated interaction and balanced development among countries and societies. Under the concept of “comprehensive human and social development”, a continuation and expansion of “sustainable development”, people are the main actors of global development and, in parallel, societies, countries and other forms of communities formed by people are also main actors of global development.

In other words, “comprehensive human and social development” not only protects all kinds of rights of the people in development, but also safeguards the basic needs of societies and countries in the global system. For example, connectivity of infrastructure worldwide for lower-cost access to more social and national resources for more. Digital technology is comprehensively integrated into people’s lives and the de-corporatized and de-organized production methods become dominant, to usher in the era of digitalization for all. Clean energy becomes the main source of energy over fossil fuel in all countries, and the distributive energy system provides clean energy to all. The core and periphery global economic system gradually falls apart, and more countries take more people into a new economic globalization system on an equal footing.

Evidently, the “comprehensive human and social development” goals require both the universal growth of individuals and the coordinated coexistence of people as groups. They call for the enhancement of strength of societies and countries, as forms of human communities, in both physical and technical terms, but also

equal arrangement of societies and countries at the institutional and conceptual levels. This requires more meticulous design and planning, and more importantly, equality and freedom at greater levels along with technology progress. No matter what, the journey should well begin to get out of the marshland and plan for global development for 2050. 🌐