



Speech by John Ashton

# Building a politics of interdependence

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Launch of [chinadialogue.net](http://chinadialogue.net)

I describe myself these days as an escaped diplomat who has been recaptured. I was enjoying life outside government running an independent organisation when the call came. It was an offer I had to take very seriously. So I am recaptured by government, but actually happily recaptured because it is a tremendous privilege to have this role.

There's one force, whether you are Chinese or African or European or American, which, more than any other is shaping the world that we live in, and that is the rapid growth of interdependence. It means that there is very little now that we can sensibly deal with, very few actions that we can take, that we can take in isolation from everybody else.

One of the scary things about the modern world is the sudden appearance of increasingly nasty epidemics. We have learned the hard way that the choices that are made by the institutions and governments in the places where they first appear have enormous importance all over the world. Such choices might make the difference between a local epidemic and a rampant global pandemic that wreaks enormous havoc.

And that's just an example of the reality of interdependence. There really are no borders. Interdependence forces us to understand that today's challenges represent not just a dilemma for us, but a shared dilemma for everybody. The environment brings that into a very tangible focus: there's no such thing as a stable climate for one country or one continent unless the climate is stable for everybody. Climate security is a global public good. It is not a typical public good because if it is not there then governments will find it increasingly difficult to deliver the other public goods.

There is interdependence, too, in natural resources. Most markets are global, which means that a sudden change in market conditions or a sudden increase in demand in one part of

the world, there are immediately consequences for everybody else who needs those resources.

The very enlightened decision, for instance, that the Chinese government took in 1998 to ban logging domestically was very successful in its own terms. In fact it was one of the most successful interventions that any government has made to deal with illegal logging. But I doubt that the people who took that decision anticipated that another consequence of it would be to prolong the civil war in Liberia, or to enrich the Russian mafia, or to have any of the knock on effects that resulted from the fact that, while it was possible to switch off the domestic supply of timber in China, it was not possible to switch off the Chinese demand for timber from the world market.

The result was an intensification of, mostly illegal, logging in Siberia, southeast Asia and west Africa – in other words, lots of unintended consequences. It's an illustration of the fact that one of the features of this more interdependent world is that somehow we need to build a broader politics of accountability. We need to understand the consequences of our actions outside the domain in which we have a natural understanding, and we need to work out how to take responsibility for those consequences.

The rise of China sharpens that shared dilemma. It sharpens it because of the sheer scale and the pace of what is happening in China. China is building infrastructure and deploying resources faster than any society ever has in human history. The migration that is taking place between the countryside in China and its rapidly growing cities is probably the biggest mass migration in human history.

That means two things: firstly that along with all that change, enormous stresses are being created and felt in China. These stresses are social and economic, and environmental. They are also very well recognised by Chinese leaders, who understand that unless they can contain them, then they will be hugely destabilising. You just have to read more or less any speech by members of the Chinese leadership in recent years and that theme emerges in one way or another. So there's a very strong sense internally that there's a shared dilemma.

But there's also an external dimension: the decisions that China takes, at all levels, including for instance anyone whose decisions affect China's carbon footprint, have enormous consequences for everybody in the world.

Similarly the decisions that we take in Europe, North America and Japan, have enormous consequences for China. We shape the limits of the possible for China in ways we don't fully understand. But it is important to realise that this is a set of opportunities as well as a set of threats.

One of the propositions that I'm working on in my current role is to challenge our colleagues in Europe to say to China that we have very similar interests when it comes to energy. We are all increasingly dependent on imported oil and gas from potentially unstable sources. We both have some of the world's most aggressive policies on energy efficiency and renewable energy, driven not only by climate change but also by a more old-fashioned desire for energy

security. So why don't we get together and see whether we can build a single market in low carbon technologies between the world's largest single market and the world's fastest growing economy? Let's just look across and see whether we can remove all of the tariff barriers in order to grow the market, and to bring down the price of technologies that we say we want to promote.

That's an example of an opportunity arising from interdependence. I don't know whether we will take it. When I discuss this with senior Chinese officials they immediately understand the attraction, but they are also sceptical about whether the European Union is capable of responding with the ambition and the coherence necessary to bring that proposition to life.

In any case what matters in responding to the shared dilemma is that we have debates that are as open and transparent and as inclusive as possible. All of us, in Europe, in China and elsewhere, depend on systems in which institutions have a tendency to disappear within their silos. We, for very understandable historical reasons, have had silo-based governments. The big challenge in dealing with interdependence is to get out of silos. To break down the barriers of communication between cultures, between sectors, between societies, and try and build a common language for dealing with interdependence. Because if we don't have a common language we won't come up with shared solutions.

In short we need to build a global politics of interdependence. That's the biggest political challenge we that have and arguably the biggest political challenge that humanity has ever faced. China is an enormously important piece of that jig-saw.

Breaking down the barriers between different voices inside and outside China is a crucial job: there are barriers between people outside China who need to understand what is going on there and need to have a dialogue about the reciprocal consequences of the decisions that are being taken, and those inside China who are taking them. Breaking those barriers is as important as is breaking down the barriers within China.

We need to do that with all the means at our disposal. Fortunately the internet provides us some very powerful new tools. I am delighted that the vision and determination of chinadialogue.net has taken shape because I think that this is a major intervention in the politics of interdependence. It brings enormous value to us as we struggle with these problems, each in our own small silo. I'm delighted to have a chance to be here on this auspicious day and to extend my very best wishes and my congratulations for what I think is a hugely important venture. Its importance is probably not yet as widely understood as it deserves to be, but will rapidly become much more widely understood.

Thank you very much and congratulations.

**John Ashton**

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