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The interaction and mutual development of “a maritime community with a shared future” and global ocean governance

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As multilateralism evolves and China’s ocean awareness grows, China remains actively engaged in global ocean governance. The country has introduced the initiative of Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future (MCSF), offering fresh perspectives for global ocean governance. The MCSF demonstrates both compatibility and adaptability with the evolving landscape of global ocean governance. This study is grounded in the historical context of the formation and evolution of China’s ocean consciousness within the broader framework of global ocean governance. Taking China’s contemporary ocean consciousness, the MCSF as the focal point, it analyzes the practical feasibility of integrating the MCSF with the evolving frameworks of global ocean governance. It is concluded that this integration process should involve ongoing review and refinement as the MCSF continues to develop.

KEYWORDS

a maritime community with a shared future, global ocean governance, international law, China, international maritime rules

1 Introduction

Intensifying activity in the oceans has coincided with growing attention globally to the sustainable management and governance of the oceans (Campbell et al., 2016). As evidenced by Goal No. 14 of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, the importance of oceans governance as a matter of global policy can hardly be overstated (Larik and Singh, 2017). Global ocean governance represents a conceptual advancement and a significant breakthrough in the practical implementation of comprehensive ocean management. It is grounded in legal and institutional frameworks (Chang, 2011), and employs a variety of tools including economic measures, public participation, scientific and technological innovation, as well as education and public awareness initiatives. It emphasizes coordination and cooperation at national, regional, and international levels. Since the beginning of the 21st century, as China has deepened its participation in the process of global ocean governance, it has emerged as a pivotal player influencing the future

development of the oceans and has taken on an increasingly significant role in global ocean governance. In the context of an era in which global issues such as traditional maritime security and non-traditional security have become increasingly prominent, China has proposed the initiative of building the Maritime Community with a Shared Future (MCSF). Its primary objectives are to foster global harmony between humanity and the oceans, address pressing global ocean challenges, uphold the international ocean order, and achieve sustainable development and utilization of marine resources (Wang and Cui, 2015). At present, China is actively implementing the MCSF in emerging areas that are closely linked to the sustainable development of the oceans. This study, taking into account China's national circumstances and the practical requirements of global ocean governance, examines the realistic approaches to promote the dissemination of the MCSF and enhance its interaction with global ocean governance processes, particularly in the formulation of new international maritime regulations.

2 The emergence of global ocean governance and the introduction of the MCSF initiative

The emergence of global ocean governance can be attributed primarily to the evolving internal dynamics of maritime affairs, which include the establishment of a relatively stable marine regulatory framework, the growing diversity of marine governance stakeholders, the surfacing of global marine challenges, the expanding capabilities for marine exploration, and the increasing depletion of marine resources, among other driving factors. It is noteworthy that technological innovation and application are the prerequisites and driving forces behind the evolution of global ocean governance (Zheng and Hu, 2018). Technological advancements have expanded the depth and breadth of global ocean governance (Chen and Liu, 2023). As technological advancements continue and the pressing developmental needs of humanity grow, nations are increasingly seeking to expand their exploitation and utilization of marine resources and spaces. Moreover, the presence of overlapping and conflicting governance mechanisms at various levels within the global ocean domain, coupled with the interdependence and interconnectedness of different regulatory objectives, has further exacerbated the prominent tensions between the resource acquisition priorities of developed countries and the emphasis on equitable benefit-sharing advocated by developing nations. This has inspired the international community to consider restructuring the global governance framework for the oceans from a holistic perspective.

Since the 21st century, global governance in the maritime domain has been advancing rapidly, leading to a reshaping of the global maritime governance order. The swift growth of China's economy, coupled with its increasingly extensive engagement in global trade, has progressively enhanced its international influence. As a result, China's stance and policies concerning maritime issues

have become more well-defined. China has progressively augmented and refined its policies pertaining to the marine economy, the development of marine resources, and the safeguarding of maritime rights and interests, with a growing emphasis on the principles of mutually beneficial marine cooperation and sustainable marine development. Within the global ocean governance framework, China has transformed from a mere participant and follower into a significant contributor and architect.

On April 23, 2019, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy, President Xi Jinping elaborated on the significant impact of the oceans on human society and first proposed the initiative of Building the MCSF. He urged countries worldwide to embrace a path of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation in maritime security, to collaboratively tackle both traditional and non-traditional challenges in the oceans, and to work towards maintaining peace and fostering development in the world's marine spaces. The MCSF advocates for shared responsibility, shared benefits, and win-win cooperation. It takes a holistic view of the oceans, aiming to promote a balance between the development and protection of marine environments (Li, 2019). This approach seeks to ensure that the ocean's resources are utilized sustainably while preserving its ecological integrity for future generations. The MCSF highlights humanity's economic and social development dependencies on marine resources, and it recognizes the inevitability of disputes arising among nations over maritime rights and interests within the confines of limited marine spaces. The international community should defend the international system with the United Nations at its core, maintain international maritime order based on international law, respect the reasonable maritime interests of all parties, bridge differences through dialogue, and resolve maritime disputes through negotiation. The MCSF strives to promote the welfare of all humanity by collaboratively maintaining peace and tranquility in the oceans, constructing a new maritime order, and fostering sustainable development of marine resources. Its ultimate objective is to achieve effective global ocean governance and realize a harmonious coexistence between humankind and the oceans.

3 The underlying logic of the interaction between the MCSF and global ocean governance

The MCSF is a theory of global ocean governance put forward by China, representing the specific application of the international governance philosophy of Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind to maritime issues.

Historically, the formation of the international maritime order was largely the result of protracted maritime power struggles among major capitalist countries. The MCSF, however, moves beyond the narrow perspective of nationalism. It transcends the Western-centric thinking framework and paradigm that have traditionally

dominated global discourse, and it goes beyond the traditional maritime power theory in three key aspects: participants, objectives, and construction paths. This marks the beginning of a new era in global maritime political theory. In the process of constructing the MCSF, a holistic, sustainable, and global perspective is adopted to establish a global maritime power theory centered on maritime rights and aimed at sustainability. This approach seeks to restore the oceans to their natural state, transforming them into a common wealth that benefits the peoples of all countries worldwide. Under the MCSF, China advocates working with other states to abide by international law, including the UNCLOS. China promotes resolving maritime disputes through dialogue, negotiation, and coordination by international organizations such as the United Nations to achieve common security and common development.

Global ocean governance aims to achieve effective ocean management on a global scale (Chang, 2009). The MCSF provides new value guidance for global ocean governance by emphasizing three “commons”: common interests, common responsibilities, and a common destiny. This aligns with the contemporary needs of global ocean governance and underscores its necessity and importance. The MCSF strives to create a maritime world characterized by lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, and a clean and beautiful environment. It strategically plans for the future development of the oceans and promotes the advancement of global ocean governance in a comprehensive and profound manner.

The contributions of the MCSF to enhancing global ocean governance are primarily reflected in three aspects: (1) Leading the restructuring of the international maritime order. The proposal of the MCSF aligns with the current need for reform in the international maritime legal order. (2) Building a multi-level global ocean governance system (Pang, 2018). Global and regional international organizations are the main forces in global ocean governance (Quan and Ye, 2019). The MCSF is of significant importance for optimizing and integrating the functions of international organizations related to maritime issues. (3) Fostering international cooperation as the main mechanism of current global ocean governance. The MCSF is committed to promoting the establishment of a cooperative ocean governance mechanism based on joint consultation and construction. This is specifically manifested in the establishment of international cooperation mechanisms for marine crisis management, the construction of a global marine ecological environment governance system, and cooperation in the conservation of fishery resources, among other aspects.

The current global ocean governance landscape is characterized by an interweaving of traditional and emerging issues, a coexistence of conflict and cooperation, and the simultaneous presence of opportunities and challenges (Cao and Chu, 2023). As a vital expression of China’s maritime discourse power, the country is actively engaging in the establishment of international maritime rules centered around the MCSF. This involvement aims to enhance the nation’s soft power and influence in ocean governance and to shape a new order in global ocean governance (Ma, 2019). Under the MCSF, as of March 2024, the Chinese Navy has deployed a total of 46 escort fleets to the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters to perform

escort missions, contributing to the security of important international trade routes (Xu, 2024). In addition, China has established blue partnerships with Portugal, the European Union, Seychelles, Mozambique, and other countries. China has also promoted the establishment of the BRICS Coordination Center for the “United Nations Ocean Decade” and has jointly conducted scientific research on marine pollution prevention and control with many countries.

4 The practical path for integrating the MCSF with global ocean governance

Historically, global ocean governance had been primarily based on Western theories, originating from a rights-based Western concept. Although the basic theories of global ocean governance crafted by the West partly reflect specific aspects of global maritime affairs in the past, they fail to address the diverse emerging challenges in the ocean today, resulting in conflicts over maritime rights and interests. The MCSF, as an innovative idea, embodies a grand and inclusive maritime governance perspective with Chinese characteristics, featuring rich connotations and an open extension (Xue, 2023).

The value pursuit of the MCSF includes maintaining maritime peace and achieving a “Marine Security Community”; creating mutually beneficial cooperation relationships and achieving a “Marine Economic Community” (Wang and Wang, 2019); improving the marine ecological environment and achieving sustainable development of a “Marine Ecological Community”; and promoting cultural exchanges and achieving openness, inclusiveness, and diversity of marine cultures in a “Marine Cultural Community”. Overall, the MCSF is compatible and adaptable with global ocean governance in the current era.

4.1 Integrating the MCSF into the formulation of international maritime rules

As times change and objective circumstances evolve, international maritime rules are in a continuous process of development and evolution. For example, the Agreement under the UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity beyond Areas of National Jurisdiction (the BBNJ Agreement) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (Wang, 2023; Kim, 2024). Draft Regulations on Exploitation of Mineral Resources in the Area are being negotiated under the International Seabed Authority (Blanchard et al., 2023). The formation and transformation of these rules depend on the interplay of various international forces and the consideration of diverse interests. To integrate new concepts into rules, it is necessary to actively incorporate them as guiding principles into the process of formulating international maritime rules. The MCSF, proposed for addressing global maritime governance issues, can contribute significantly to global ocean

governance and its rule system (Wu, 2021). Therefore, China should actively participate in the formulation of international maritime rules, amplify the voice of the MCSF, clearly explain the connotations of related concepts, and strive to influence the development of related international maritime rules.

The development of international maritime rules can manifest in various forms that substantially influence the content of international rules, including creation, recognition, interpretation, application, amendment, and abrogation (Fang, 2021). These processes largely depend on the degree to which various subjects of international law recognize them. Therefore, for the international community to accept the MCSF, it is necessary for the MCSF itself to continuously adapt to the evolving connotations of the times. In participating in global ocean governance, China should both respect and comply with existing mature and well-established international maritime rules, interpreting and applying these rules in good faith. At the same time, for those ambiguous areas in international maritime rules, China should actively promote the definition of their content, establishing an operable rule system based on logical persuasiveness, just values and scientific basis (Zhang, 2017). On the other hand, the capability to formulate international maritime rules is influenced not only by internal conditions, such as the capacity to create maritime rules, but also by external conditions. A country's overall national strength and its advantageous maritime position can expand the influence of its rule-creation capacity, promoting the "internationalization" of the maritime rules it establishes. Therefore, China is enhancing its participation in global ocean governance by improving its soft power, including its influence in discourse, as well as strengthening its economic and technological maritime capabilities.

4.2 Using the "belt and road" initiative as an opportunity to facilitate the international dissemination of the MCSF

As a top-level national strategy, China's "Belt and Road" initiative intrinsically embraces a wealth of maritime components. By upholding the global governance tenets of widespread consultation, collaborative contribution, and mutual benefits, while championing unity in diversity and inclusivity in development, this initiative sets a new standard for international cooperation (Yang, 2021). The "Belt and Road" is a project of scale which provides an opportunity for a central governing body to develop and implement an overarching ocean governance framework and policy (Zhang et al., 2023), and it serves as an important platform for China to promote the dissemination of the MCSF.

The "Belt and Road" initiative embraces authentic multilateralism and imposes no political stipulations. It offers a fresh paradigm for establishing blue partnerships, steering the evolution of global maritime governance in a more equitable and sensible direction. The initiative has spurred the innovation and refinement of global maritime governance rules. In developing governance mechanisms for emerging maritime domains, it entails comprehensive consultations and profound exchanges on

novel issues, taking into account the collaborative needs and practical realities of all stakeholders. The initiative seeks to attain strategic alignment and planning integration among participating nations while simultaneously creating rules and standards with broad applicability during the process. It endeavors to foster a convergence of interests and synchronization of plans among the countries involved. The "Global Survey on China's National Image" released by the Institute of Contemporary China and World Studies in 2020 shows that the "Belt and Road" initiative is the most recognized Chinese concept and proposition abroad. Over seventy percent of overseas respondents acknowledge the positive impact of the "Belt and Road" initiative on individuals, nations, and global governance (Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies, 2020). The report "Global Trends in Countries' Perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative" (Alicia and Schindowski, 2003) released by the European think tank Bruegel in 2023 indicates that countries around the world generally have a positive view of the joint construction of the "Belt and Road" initiative (Wang and Fang, 2023).

Consequently, this initiative not only contributes to mitigating Western opposition to China's involvement in global ocean governance but also facilitates the proliferation and acceptance of the MCSF within the international community. Simultaneously, throughout the collaborative endeavour of building the "Belt and Road", the principles of consultation, joint construction, and shared benefits are persistently applied, enriching and refining the substance of the MCSF. By incorporating the legitimate concerns and requirements of an increasing number of countries into the MCSF, this process fosters its alignment with the current landscape of global ocean governance.

5 Conclusions

Amidst the unparalleled global transformations, the global ocean governance system and its mechanisms are currently navigating a metamorphic "deep water" phase and a pivotal "window of opportunity" for recalibrating the international maritime order. China's expansive coastline and substantial maritime interests necessitate its active participation in global ocean governance, and reciprocally, the advancement of global ocean governance is contingent upon China's engagement. The MCSF is the fundamental concept that China champions in its contribution to global ocean governance. It not only harmonizes with China's contemporary developmental trajectory but also serves the interests of sustainable ocean development for the global populace, providing a robust theoretical foundation and practical cornerstone for China's involvement in shaping the future of the world's oceans (Wang and Fang, 2023). Some pragmatic approaches has been carried out by China, though such implementation is just starting, the realization of Chinese future maritime vision remains to be seen (Xu and Tan, 2023). Global ocean governance is a monumental and comprehensive endeavor that necessitates the sustained, collaborative efforts and pioneering practices of the international community. As the architect of the MCSF, China bears the responsibility to actively

communicate its core values to the global community, fostering a deeper worldwide understanding and acceptance of this vision. Moreover, as an emerging concept, the MCSF should be subject to ongoing evaluation and refinement throughout the evolution of global ocean governance to ensure its continued relevance and compatibility with the ever-changing landscape of maritime affairs.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

XX: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ZZ: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JW: Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

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