

Lead the way

by Dr Sanna Kopra, *author of China and great power responsibility for climate change*



Photo: Pixabay

In fact, there are also strong domestic incentives for China to halt emissions growth. The Chinese government has learned that it is in its interests to pursue a “green economy” and reduce air pollution as well as to adapt different sectors of the society to mitigate some of the harmful effects of climate change.

China's stand

The country is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), its Kyoto Protocol (1997), and the Paris Agreement (2015). In contrast to the US, where President Trump calls climate change a “Chinese hoax” and politicians continue to debate whether or not climate change is caused by human activities, there is no dispute about the reality of climate change in China. The Chinese government acknowledges that climate change is a serious risk to global security and wellbeing, and that China is “one of the most vulnerable countries” to its adverse effects such as extreme weather events, sea level rise, floods, etc. Therefore, China has taken part in international climate negotiations since they started in the late 1980s.



CHINA AND GREAT POWER RESPONSIBILITY FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

Sanna Kopra



notions of great power responsibility in general and international climate politics in particular. The author looks empirically at the Chinese party-state's conceptions of state responsibility, discusses the influence of those notions on China's role in international climate politics, and considers both how China will act out its climate responsibility in the future and the broader implications of these actions. Alongside the argument that the international norm of climate responsibility is an emerging attribute of great power responsibility, Kopra develops a normative framework of great power responsibility to shed new light on the transformations China's rise will yield and the kind of great power China will prove to be.



As American leadership over climate change declines, China has begun to identify itself as a great power by formulating ambitious climate policies. Based on the premise that great powers have unique responsibilities, this book explores how China's rise to great power status transforms

For years, however, China stressed exclusively the historic, cumulative responsibility of developed countries to cut emissions and as such refused to commit to any emissions reduction targets as they would have harmed its overall development plans. Then again, after the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, where China was harshly criticized by many Western politicians and journalists for blocking the progress, the country has

After last summer's devastating forest fires and sweltering heat waves across the Northern Hemisphere, the global consciousness of climate change has increased dramatically. As President Donald J. Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement, the first-ever universal global climate deal adopted in 2015, the world has started to expect China, alongside the EU, to step up its emerging leadership role on climate change. In my newly published book *China and great power responsibility for climate change* I come to a conclusion that China indeed seems to be ready to live up to that leadership role: it increasingly defines climate responsibility as an attribute of great power responsibility and has made all its key climate policies public with a reference to its great power status.

played a substantially more constructive role in international climate politics. It began to collaborate with the US on climate issues, and the two countries issued several joint climate statements between 2013 and 2016. Their climate cooperation increased political will around the world and made the conclusion of the Paris Agreement possible in 2015.

In contrast to the Kyoto Protocol, which obligated only developed countries to cut their emissions – the key reason that then US President George W. Bush found it unfair and refused to ratify it in 1998 – the Paris Agreement does not set top-down emissions reduction targets for any country. Instead, it is based on states' nationally determined climate strategies to reduce emissions. The voluntary nature of the agreement appealed to China: it was able to set a moderate national contribution that it would rather easily exceed and hence gain face on the global level.

China's nationally determined contribution to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change pledges by 2030 include, first, to achieve the peaking of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions around 2030 and make a best effort to peak earlier; second, to lower CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP by 60% to 65% from the 2005 level; third, to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20%; and lastly, to increase the

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Photo: Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs

forest stock volume by around 4.5b m³ over the 2005 level.

Nevertheless, according to Climate Action Tracker, an independent scientific analysis organization, China's nationally determined emissions reduction commitment is "highly insufficient." If other states won't implement considerably more ambitious emissions reduction measures than China, there is little prospect of reaching the Paris Agreement's goal to limit the global average temperature rise to 2°C.

The (domestic) climate policy

Since 2006, China has been the biggest CO₂ emitter, accounting for approximately 30% of the world's total emissions. In 2007, China issued its first national climate change programme, and in the following year, China's first white paper on climate change was published. In 2013, the state's first national climate change adaptation plan was issued, warning about the ill-preparedness of the entire Chinese society to the adverse effects of climate change. Today, the pursuit of a low-carbon society is largely integrated into all development plans in China, the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) being the key document.

About 60% of China's energy mix continues to be based on coal, which causes severe air pollution around the country. Given the growing discontent over environmental pollution amongst the country's huge middle class (which rose from 80m in 2002 to 430m today, only to increase up to around 800m in the 2020s), the government has no choice but to take the problem seriously. In 2014, the Chinese premier indeed declared a "war against pollution." Another important motivator for decreasing the dependence on coal and other (imported) fossil fuels is energy security. In order to secure the continuance of its economic growth, China needs a lot of energy as well as considerable natural

resources (which is one of the main driving forces behind the Belt and Road Initiative's projects that are targeted towards African and Middle East economies; read more in the BTJ 6/16's article *All roads lead to Beijing. Setting the world's agenda with the New Silk Road*). The 13th Five-Year Plan urges the nation to decrease the consumption of coal to below 55% and to increase the share of the non-fossil energy to 15% of the total energy mix. In these efforts, hydropower and nuclear energy play the most important role, while China has also invested significantly in renewable energy. In December 2017, the country launched the first phase of a national emissions trading system, and the state has become the biggest investor in carbon dioxide capture and storage technology in the world.

The Arctic

Recently, China also became increasingly interested in taking part in the economics and politics of the Arctic region. In January 2018, the Chinese government published its long-awaited Arctic white paper which describes the state's visions and policies in the Arctic and attempts to decrease so-called China threat theories that speculate about the "real" motives of its regional engagement.

In addition to China's interests in the Arctic's natural resources and new, shorter shipping lanes as well as its efforts to strengthen its position in international political decision-making, climate change is an important driver of China's Arctic engagement. China's Arctic strategy highlights the importance of scientific research on Arctic change and its global ramifications. Scientific findings indicate that the melting of the Arctic ice cap will increase haze pollution in Eastern China, cause flooding in many of China's coastal megacities, and alter many global natural processes,

thus potentially hindering agricultural production in China. Yet, the Arctic white paper introduces no new climate change mitigation targets or plans, although the country's carbon emissions are the biggest contributor to Arctic climate change as such.

Future prospects

In October 2017, President Xi announced that China will take the "driver's seat" in international climate negotiations. At present, however, it remains unclear in what direction China will be driving. Will it demonstrate its leadership role by unveiling ambitious climate mitigation plans that would inspire the entire world to speed up collective efforts to tackle climate change? Or will China use its growing leverage to reintroduce the bifurcation of climate responsibilities into those of the developed and those of the developing countries – a split abandoned by the Paris Agreement so as to make a universal deal feasible?

Since China is the largest carbon emitter in the world, its policies for limiting greenhouse gas emissions will have a major global impact for decades to come. China's CO₂ emissions decreased between 2014 and 2016 as a result of decreasing demand for coal that was attributable to slow economic growth, among other factors. In 2017, however, China's emissions again rose as coal consumption increased. At present, it remains unclear whether and how much China's emissions will increase before they reach their peak level.

When it comes to Europe-China relations, climate change mitigation and adaptation provides plenty of opportunities to cooperate in the fields of emissions trading systems, energy efficiency, clean energy, low-emission transportation, low-carbon cities, etc. At the China-EU Summit held in July 2018, the two parties reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of the Paris Agreement and agreed to intensify their cooperation on climate change and clean energy. Hence, the EU plays an important role in encouraging China to demonstrate its climate leadership in practice. ■



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