Spheres of Influence

CHINA

THE NEXT ENVIRONMENTAL SUPER POWER?

With 1.3 billion people and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, China's position as a player on the international environmental scene has steadily expanded in the past 30 years. Entering the World Trade Organization in 2001 and now preparing to host the Summer Olympics in 2008 have boosted China's world presence. Clearly, a growing recognition of the interdependence between its developing economy, world politics, and environmental issues has prompted China to take steps to remedy some of its most serious problems.

What is not clear, however, is whether these steps represent real progress on environmental issues or whether they are merely symbolic gestures made to curry favor on the international stage. The answer to this question is very much the subject of debate, one that is increasingly centered on the means of achieving balance between China's economic growth and environmental health protection.

Developing a Presence

In 1973, China held its first National Environmental Protection Conference and created its own environmental protection agencies at the central and local levels. Since then, environmental issues have risen in importance in all development spheres. In 1998, China's National Environmental Protection Agency was promoted to the ministerial level, creating the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and elevating the status of environmental concerns in domestic and international governmental policy making. SEPA director Wang Zhijia said in a 16 January 2002 Internet article by the Xinhua News Agency that the impact of China's environmental issues on its national security, economy, and foreign trade have made "environmental diplomacy" an increasingly vital aspect of the country's foreign relations.

The SEPA website lists 50 international environmental treaties, protocols, and conventions in which China has been involved since 1946. These agreements cover a wide range of issues, including hazardous waste, protection of the ozone layer, biological diversity, protection of wetlands, desertification, endangered species, tropical timber, whaling, marine oil pollution, nuclear pollution, and liability for damage caused by objects launched into outer space.

But domestic implementation of international agreements can be challenging for China, in part because SEPA lacks power, being fairly low in the central government hierarchy. And although central officials may show signs of becoming more committed and welcoming international aid, a huge challenge lies in getting the provinces and local governments to implement environmental policies. Decentralization of power to local governments in the reform era has meant local governments must depend on their own economic development rather than subsidies from the central government to provide environmental funds. So environmental protection is not a priority.

Many argue, too, that ceremonial signings may generate good press but aren't necessarily an accurate measure of a country's environmental commitment. China's first major appearance in the global environmental arena was at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972, says Barbara Finamore, a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York City and director of the council's China clean energy project. "This marked the beginning of Chinese governmental efforts to introduce international environmental issues at the policy level," she says. "But this was also the time of Chairman Mao, and China was generally suspicious of anything foreign. Their Stockholm delegates took a hard-line position that global environmental policies were primarily designed to benefit developed countries, which they felt were trying to force standards on developing countries before they could actually develop. One of the reasons China attended the 1972 Stockholm Convention was to make their position clear."

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> World Bank

In 1998, China signed but did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which calls for developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. The Kyoto Protocol has featured a sometimes contentious series of negotiations in which the developed countries, primarily the United States, have been pitted against the developing countries, especially China. "The world's two environmental superpowers, the United States and China, are now locked in a struggle over climate policy that at times seems to rival the bitterness of the Cold War," states a press release issued by the Worldwatch Institute in November 1998. The United States, which also has signed but not ratified the agreement, was unwilling to ratify the treaty until developing countries also made a strong commitment to reduce their own emissions. But China, along with India, refused to consider voluntary reductions.

"Next to the United States, China is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world," says Richard Morgenstern, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future, a Washington, D.C.–based advocacy organization that conducts independent research on environmental issues. "Their signing of the Kyoto Protocol, however, doesn't yet mean much, because as a developing country they still have minimal obligations at this point. But if they ratify it, this would signal a decision to participate in the discussions on emission reductions for the next budget period. Potentially this could lead to some form of commitment on their part. Ratification would be motivated by a desire to take part in both the global economic and the global environmental systems—they want to be seen as a good global citizen."

China was one of the first nations to act on the environmental agenda ("Agenda 21") developed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. Agenda 21 calls for global environmental protection and sustainable development as well as for funding mechanisms to help developing countries adhere to the conference's resulting principles. In response to the agenda, the China State Council approved a series of strategies in 1994 to help address domestic population, environment, and development issues.

"China responded so quickly because their own Agenda 21 gave them a lot of recognition internationally as a responsible actor and a forward-thinking country," says Finamore. "They were the first ones out of the starting gate. This was shortly after the events at Tiananman

Square, and China saw this as a way to get some positive recognition. But perhaps more importantly they saw Agenda 21 as a way to get more financial assistance for environmental projects—they came up with a list of priority projects that would need international funds to bring to fruition." Finamore says the strategy worked to some extent, although probably not as much as China wanted. But she adds that an important benefit for China of developing its own Agenda 21 was to bring together officials from many different government agencies to coordinate domestic environmental policy, a move that has helped lead to broader institutional reforms.

Such industrial reforms and aggressive energy conservation laws, particularly as regards coal energy, have helped China reduce its carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide emissions since the mid-1990s. But there is much still to be done. China relies on coal for most of its industrial and household energy needs, and coal burning is one of the biggest environmental problems in China. Acid rain falls on an estimated 30% of China's total land area. Respiratory diseases are among the country's biggest health hazards, especially in major cities such as Beijing (where, besides the threat posed by coal burning, 100,000 new vehicles take to the roads each year). With Beijing the site of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, China is now focusing many of its environmental efforts on cleaning up its capital city for this major international event [see "Beijing Goes for the Olympic Green," p. A511 this issue].

Substance or Show?

"Becoming actively involved in international environmental issues is all tied in with China wanting to be a leader in the world," says Susan Shen, who is the international coordinator for the environment with the World Bank. "As one of the biggest contributors to their own—as well as regional and global—environmental problems, they can't afford to stay out of these kinds of discussions. And with the upcoming Olympics, they really do want to have a seat at the table in the international arena. They also see themselves as representing the interests of the world's developing countries at international environmental meetings. They have very firm and strong positions, and when China speaks up, people listen."

China's reliance on coal as its primary energy source has caused 7 of its cities to be featured among the top 10 most polluted cities in the world, according to a 1998 study by the World Health Organization. Like many countries, China is counting in part on technology to help resolve its critical environmental problems, looking to replace coal with cleaner fuels such as natural gas, or renewable energy sources such as hydropower and wind energy. The key to adopting new technologies, however, is international money, either in grants or loans from developed countries.

This is one reason why China has consistently sought the implementation of funding mechanisms when negotiating global environmental agreements. In 1991, China encouraged the development of the Global Environment Facility, which helps developing countries fund sustainable development projects that also protect the global environment. The facility is the designated financial mechanism for international agreements on biodiversity, climate change, and persistent organic pollutants. It also supports projects that combat desertification and protect international waters and the ozone layer.

International funding mechanisms are paying off. According to Jennifer Turner, a senior project associate with the Environmental Change and Security Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a huge number of international projects—including multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental organization efforts—have been initiated in China. Although not always tied to specific international environmental treaties, such projects are doing a lot to help build China's capacity in the policy, technology, and even civil society spheres to improve environmental protection. Through the use of global environment funds, donated funds, and loans from the World Bank and foreign governments, China is fulfilling its commitment to international society to solve its environmental problems step by step, said Wang in the January 16 Xinhua News Agency article.

Referring to China's winning bid to host the Olympics, Eric Zusman, a doctoral student at the University of California at Los Angeles who recently presented research papers at international meetings on contemporary Chinese environmental policy, says, "China was involved in making sure there was a lot of money to grease the wheel. They also know that, while economic growth is a priority, a lack of environmental protection will also hurt that growth. As it becomes more of an international economic power, China realizes it has to be more responsible for its own environment."

But, Zusman says, developed countries have found it very difficult to impose their ideas on China. "Everything has to be negotiated," he says. "And while international aid and other considerations are going to shape and condition their environmental policies, China's general approach is that they're still going to do what they want to do."

Turner puts it this way: "In general, China has to see a local benefit in its international commitments. But at the same time, they want to play with the big boys and be treated as a serious player."

As one of the biggest countries with one of the largest populations in the world, China's willingness to cooperate with other nations, as well as its ability to attract funds to upgrade its technology and clean up persistent pollution problems, will be critical to its environment and its environmental health. Regardless of why China is stepping up its environmental diplomacy, the net effect should be a benefit to its own people and natural resources as well as those of Asia and the world.

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