

**China's Environmental Diplomacy: From  
Sovereignty to Authoritarian Environmentalism**

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## **Abstract**

In December 2020, at the Climate Ambition Summit which was held to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Paris climate accord, President Xi Jinping while addressing via video link, pledged to have carbon dioxide emission peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. Also, China is the first developing country to adopt and implement a national climate change program and submit its intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In June 2017, when President Trump decided to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, it led global climate governance into a transitional era. This situation not only created an opportunity but also posed a challenge for China, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), with the largest population in the world and also the fastest-growing trillion-dollar economy. It is imperative and interesting to study the transition in China's position in the international climate change negotiations. This paper is an attempt to study how China's Environmental Diplomacy is shaped by its domestic issues. It is also interesting to find how China prioritizes the issues it needs to tackle in order to maintain its domestic stability. For this study, various primary sources (Chinese Language Sources) are studied to analyze the evolution of China's Environmental Diplomacy, its development, and the current posture, which will also help in understanding how the Chinese leaders have perceived the global environmental regime and how have they developed their participation strategy.

Keywords: Climate Change, Environmental Diplomacy, Environmental Sovereignty, Authoritarian Environmentalism, Paris Agreement, Greenhouse Gases

## Introduction

Last year December, at the Climate Ambition Summit which was held to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Paris climate accord, President Xi Jinping while addressing via video link, pledged to have carbon dioxide emission peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. Also, China is the first developing country to adopt and implement a national climate change program and submit its intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In addition, China has been the world's largest plug-in electric vehicles (new-energy vehicle/NEVs) market for five years with cumulative sales of 5.5 million units through December 2020.

In June 2017, when ex-American President Trump decided to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, it led global climate governance into a transitional era. As Wu Xinbo argues, "'De-Americanisation' objectively creates a window of opportunity for various regions and countries to reposition themselves and solve various historical problems" (Doshi 2021). The "De-Americanisation" of the Paris Agreement not only created an opportunity but also posed a challenge for China, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), with the largest population in the world and the fastest-growing trillion-dollar economy. It is worth noting that under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has announced unprecedented commitments, which will have a long-term impact on the global environmental regime. Also, the past decades have witnessed that China has strongly influenced the international climate change negotiations. However, domestically China has not been able to reach its targets projected in the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. The carbon intensity reduction targets remained flat at 18 percent and the target to reduce energy use per unit of GDP actually dropped from 15 percent to 13.5 percent (Fan Dai 2021)

China's Environmental Diplomacy has come a long way and plays an important role in the framing of the international climate change policies. China overtook the United States (US) in 2006, to become the largest national source of carbon dioxide emissions (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2007). Its economy is one of the largest and the fastest growing. China is predicted to produce 16bn tonnes of greenhouse gases (GHGs) [温室气体 wenshi qiti] in 2030—four times the entire world's output in 1900 (The Economist 2019). Climate change has been recognized as a major threat to China since the 1990s and has increasingly caught the attention of China's leaders. They are concerned that global warming may lead to sea-level rise and to some extreme weather events, which would cause coastal flooding and damage in China. Global warming can also lead to environmental degradation and resource scarcities in China. It could also contribute to existing tensions in the region, increasing the potential for violent intra-state and inter-state conflict (Yu 2008: 47). China with its 1.4 billion population, the second largest and the fastest-growing economy, has become a key player in the international regime. China has a vast territory (9.6 million sq. km) with huge natural resources, but the per capita resource base is low. 22 percent of the world's population lives on 7 percent of the world's arable land with only 8 percent of the world's natural resources (Morton 2009: 34). Consequently, its role in the international climate change negotiations is overwhelming.

## Chinese Views on Environmental Diplomacy

The definition of 'Environmental Diplomacy' is rather nascent and contested. However, the way the Chinese scholars have defined the term interestingly indicates that China's environmental diplomacy has some distinct characteristics which have been developed, to fulfil its interests. There is a list of Chinese scholars who share identical views: Cai Shouqiu (蔡守秋) in his book, *Huanjing waijiao gailun* (环境外交概论) [An Outline of Environmental Diplomacy] has defined the term in two ways, based on the context. In a broader context environmental diplomacy uses diplomatic methods to regulate the other diplomatic activities. And in a narrower context it indicates that a country through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency represents its state organs and the individuals and uses negotiations and other peaceful measures to manage and regulate its different activities of national environmental relations (Cai 1992:10). Wang Zhijia (王之佳) (1992), who was the former Director-

General in the Department of International Cooperation and State Environmental Protection Administration of China (1996-2003) and also the author of the book *Zhongguo huanjing waijiao* (中国环境外交) [China's Environmental Diplomacy] mentions that environmental diplomacy is meant for resolving the global and the regional environmental issues and to safeguard the legitimate environmental rights of China and the other developing countries. It promotes multilateral and bilateral environmental cooperation and international exchange. In an article by the Xinhua News Agency on 16 January 2002, Wang said 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.

Ding Jinguang (丁金光) mentions in his book *Guoji huanjing waijiao* (国际环境外交) [International Environmental Diplomacy] that environmental diplomacy has different peaceful methods like the negotiations and talks to regulate the international environmental relations. The international environmental relation forms the base for environmental diplomacy. Moreover, the international environmental relation is a vital part of international relations which indicates the relation of one state with the other states. And environmental diplomacy of a country promotes its environmental foreign policy, safeguards its environmental rights, and helps in promoting its economic and environmental development (Ding 丁 2007: 2).

These views reflect that China's environmental diplomacy is closely linked with foreign policy, economic growth, and environmental protection. China has been consistently attempting to construct efficient environmental diplomacy which can safeguard sovereignty, earn the respect of being a responsible state and fulfil its own national interests. However, in the recent past, China seems to have encountered a lot of unprecedented dissatisfaction regarding the deteriorating environmental conditions within the country. Hundreds of protests and sit-ins have taken place. Although the authorities have not let these protests gain much attention, but pressure has been felt to address the issue.

### **China's Position in the International Climate Change Negotiations after the Kyoto Protocol**

China took part in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations from its preliminary stages, viewing climate change as a controversial issue that involved the North-South divide. Historically, China believed that developed countries should take the responsibility for environmental protection and allow the developing countries the opportunity to advance as much as the developed countries. Chen and Xia also point out, that several scholars shared a common sceptical view on the climate change negotiation talks. They believed that environmental diplomacy initially started by the developed nations like the US, Britain, EU, and Japan, etc. to use the environmental issue as a pretext to restrict China and to strive for the domination of the environmental industries and environmental regions throughout the globe (Xia and Chen 2012: 366).

During the 2000s and 2010s climate leadership research has focused on the European Union, with a few exceptions of the United States (US). Leaders besides them began to be recognized after the Copenhagen conference in 2009, at which emerging developing countries negotiated the outcome with the US (Hurri 2020). Chen Yaobang, head of China's diplomatic delegations to climate-related conferences, said at the Kyoto Conference of Parties (COP3) in 1997 that China adamantly opposed any commitment to reduce its GHG emissions before it becomes a 'middle income' country. He also rejected emissions-trading and joint-implementation schemes, insisting that these approaches were unacceptable because they would allow developed countries to shirk their responsibilities for emissions reductions at home while 'disregarding the living environment of people in other countries' (Harris and Yu 2009: 58). As reported by the BBC World Monitoring on 11 December 1997, China welcomed the International Climate Change Protocol agreed earlier in the day in Kyoto, but stated that the rapidly developing and energy-hungry country will not take on obligations to limit GHGs for 50 more years (BBC: 1997).

Subsequently, at COP5 in 1999, the Chinese delegation headed by Liu Jiang reiterated the basic position that China has expounded at COP3. On the issue of Chinese commitment to limiting the GHG

emissions, Liu said, 'it is impossible for the Chinese government to undertake any obligation of GHG emissions reduction before China attains the level of a medium-developed country. He said China would instead 'continue striving to abate the growth of GHG emissions in line with her own sustainable development strategy and will continue actively promoting and participating in international cooperation' (Yu 2008: 57). Both the statements of the officials are in fact a reiteration of the 3-step development strategy for the country's modernization that was put forward in 1987 at the 13th CPC National Congress which included the following three steps:

- Step 1) In 10 years i.e. from 1981 to 1990, the country aimed to double its per capita GDP.
- Step 2) Per capita GDP to double again from 1991-2000 for China to become a fairly well-off society.
- Step 3) By the middle of the 21st century China will realize modernisation. Its level of development is expected to be on par with the moderately developed countries (Wang 2012).

China signed the Kyoto protocol on 29 May 1998. At COP5 in 1999, the Chinese delegation headed by Liu Jiang the same position as expounded at the COP3. In addition to that, the Chinese delegation also showed its interest in promoting and participating in international cooperation (Liu 2002). After the COP5, in contrast to the earlier positions, China started to shift its position for the flexible mechanisms. According to one of the Chinese assessments of the situation, 'the flexible mechanisms are very complicated, and we know little about them. We should take the "no voice" (不表态/ bu biao tai) policy in this issue' (Harris and Yu 2009:5 9). China gave the ratification approval on 30th August 2002. Its entry into the Protocol came into force on 16th February 2005.

As a step further, China endorsed the Bali Roadmap in 2007, which mentions commitments by developing countries. It mentions "Nationally appropriate mitigation actions by developing country Parties in the context of sustainable development, supported and enabled by technology, financing, and capacity-building, in a measurable, reportable and a verified manner (Secretariat of the UNFCCC 2007: 3). This move of China was much appreciated globally, and it was an indication for future acceptances. Ahead of the Copenhagen Summit, China played a very crucial role in bringing together the major developing countries under one umbrella, the BASIC nations. This group of developing nations played a tremendous role in brokering the Copenhagen Accord in 2009. That also helped to mobilize the developing countries and bind them around the CBDR. China unveiled its emissions targets ahead of the Copenhagen UN summit which was held from 7-18 December 2009. China's Premier Wen Jiabao told delegates: 'To meet the climate change challenge, the international community must strengthen confidence, build consensus, make vigorous efforts and enhance cooperation'. He added that in addressing climate change, the international community must not 'turn a blind eye to historical responsibilities, per capita emissions and different levels of development'. A statement from Beijing's State Council said: 'This is a voluntary action taken by the Chinese government based on its own national conditions and is a major contribution to the global effort in tackling climate change,' Xinhua news agency reported on 26 November 2009 (BBC 2009). This summit aimed to finalize a treaty to succeed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, although observers predicted this to be unlikely. Beijing said it would aim to reduce its 'carbon intensity' by 40-45 percent by the year 2020, compared with 2005 levels. China was criticised during the summit for not offering stronger carbon emissions targets and for resisting international monitoring of its emissions control (BBC 2009). Above all that, China was also accused of blocking a more substantial agreement from being reached.

At the Cancun Climate Summit in 2010, China was seen to be very cooperative. The Cancun Agreements created new standards of transparency, where major economies including China, will report on the progress they are making in meeting their national climate actions or targets (Jennifer et al.:2010). By 2010, China had registered 2,593 Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) investment projects, which represents 45 per cent of the global total and 57 per cent of the total for the Asia Pacific Region. China also became the largest seller of the CDM credits with a 72 per cent share of the U.S.\$ 2.7 billion primary market (Wulansari 2015).

In 2011, China seemingly reversed its longstanding opposition to legally binding commitments when it signed on the Durban Platform, which aims to complete negotiations on a new legal instrument by 2015. This was in part a response to withering criticism it faced after its confrontational stance at the Copenhagen two years earlier, combined with pressure on China by small island states and large developing countries like Mexico and Argentine. Moreover, at Durban, China did not sign on to either a legally binding treaty or to emission limits. It simply agreed to begin negotiations on a new 'legal instrument or agreed outcome with legal force'. Xie Zhenhua (解振华) one of China's chief negotiators, made clear that the participation was contingent on five preconditions, including the fulfilment of Kyoto Protocol pledges through a second commitment period. (Wulansari 2015).

The U.N. climate talks in Doha in 2012 (COP18), brought out the second commitment period of the "Kyoto Protocol". The summit established for the first time that rich nations should move towards compensating poor nations for losses due to climate change. The Chief of Chinese delegation to the Doha climate conference, Xie Zhenhua urged for the extension of the Kyoto Protocol and the implementation of finance support by rich countries are of central importance for the negotiations. He said a ratifiable and legally-binding amendment of the Kyoto Protocol needs to be worked out in Doha so that the treaty can enter an extension right after its first commitment period expires at the end of 2012 (China Daily 2012).

The year 2013, is the first year of implementing the outcome of Bali mandate negotiations and is also the first year of starting consultations under Durban platform. The pattern of major negotiating powers under the Durban Platform shows differences under the Bali Mandate. China and other rapidly growing economies, which are in the process of urbanization and industrialization, formed a group of Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC). At the COP19, in Warsaw, China along with the developing giants like Brazil as well as with the poor countries in Africa demanded the developed countries to ramp up the funding for reducing emissions (Tollefson 2013: 175).

The COP20 was held in Lima, Peru from 1 December to 12 December 2014. This summit provided an opportunity for the participating countries to make progress in establishing an international climate agreement at the COP21 in Paris. In November 2014 China, and U.S., the two major carbon dioxide emitters, put forward their national climate action commitments.

China submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) to the UNFCCC on 30 June 2015. It mentioned that China would peak its gross emissions in 2030. And it would also increase the share of non-fossil fuel in primary energy consumption to around 20 per cent by 2030. Thirdly China also intended to lower the carbon dioxide intensity by 60 per cent to 65 per cent from the 2005 levels (UNFCCC 2015). China's announced in September 2015 to provide a climate fund of U.S.\$ 3.1 billion. This can be seen as China's proactive and leadership positioning on climate change (Xinhua 2015). Xie Zhenhua, China's chief negotiator at the Paris Climate Summit (COP21) which was held from 30 November to 12 December 2015, had emphasised that China's position was to secure an agreement that would provide a mechanism to tackle climate change after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2020, to confirm the international commitment to the transition to low-carbon development, and to resolve the issue of funding and technology transfers, which concerned developing countries the most. More importantly, China wanted to uphold the principle of "Common but Differentiated Responsibility" (CBDR) that underlies the principle of fairness and national contribution according to respective capabilities (Li 2016: 51). China's position on the Paris Agreement was explicitly stated in President Xi's speech, 'Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,' delivered at the UN Office of Geneva in January 2017 (Zhang 2017: 224):

*The Paris Agreement is a milestone in the history of climate governance. We must ensure this endeavour is not derailed. All Parties should work together to implement the Paris Agreement. China will continue to take steps to tackle climate change and fully honour its obligations.*



The Chinese government has been unwavering in its support for the Paris Agreement. President Xi Jinping has described the Paris Agreement a ‘hard-won achievement...in keeping with the underlying trend of global development’ and ‘milestone in the history of climate governance’ that ‘we must ensure is not derailed’. In his high-profile remarks to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi said, ‘Taking the driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavour for ecological civilization’ (Sandalow 2018: 29).

However, at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021 held in April this year, President Xi highlighted the need for global cooperation to combat climate change. However, he also reiterated, “We need ..... to do more to implement the Paris Agreement on climate change. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities must be upheld, and concerns of developing countries on capital, technology and capacity building must be addressed”.

China’s position in the international climate change negotiations expresses both continuity and changes. China has always been keen to put forth its priorities like economic development and poverty eradication. However, from being not so active to being seen as a ‘global leader’ on climate change, China’s environmental diplomacy has undergone commendable progress. The earlier Xi, Obama joint climate deal was a pioneering success for both the U.S. and China and, also for the global community. The willingness shown by the US to work with China to combat climate change, after several meetings between the Chinese climate envoy, Mr. Xie Zhenhua, and the US counterpart John Kerry in Shanghai in April this year, might become an opportunity for China’s environmental diplomacy to play a greater role and make China a ‘responsible stakeholder’.

### **Analysis of China’s Environmental Diplomacy**

Before analysing China’s environmental diplomacy and the role it plays in the international climate politics, it is important to look at how a state like China, with an authoritarian domestic politics, picks and chooses the extent of its engagement with the international system. What we have witnessed in the past decades is that China has the ability to profit from within the International Liberal Order (ILO). The greater Chinese influence in the ILO will shift the international order in a more Westphalian direction, as Beijing continues to support the principles enshrined in the UN Charter of state sovereignty, equality, and non-interference, while circumscribing the liberal emphasis on individual political freedoms and movement towards more intrusive international institutions (Weiss and Wallace 2021: 637). Chinese scholars like Zhang Haibin points out that China’s environmental diplomacy has sovereignty as its focus, and through different formal institutions of the state, by utilizing diplomatic methods like talks and negotiations, deal with and regulate different activities in the field of environment in international relations. It mainly focuses on the strengthening of international environmental cooperation, legislative negotiations, environmental treaties and deals with the issues and challenges of the international environment (Zhang 1998: 12). According to Zhu Feng, there is a strong will in China to curb emissions. And the government recognizes that building an ambitious environment policy is both in its self-interest and will also encourage others to view it as a responsible stakeholder. However, China continues to view the environmental issue as an issue of sovereignty and is reluctant to submit to an international oversight regime of norms and regulations. Huang Quansheng mentions the ‘Triangular Relation’ (sanjiao guanxi 三角关系) between the environmental diplomacy, national sovereignty and the international environment. The establishment of environmental diplomacy regulates international environmental relations to defend the national environmental sovereignty and strive for national environmental rights and interests. He highlights that the motive of environmental diplomacy of a country is to defend its national sovereignty and at the same time strive for the development right of a country while considering the common international environmental interest. Interestingly, Qi Feng mentions that if Chinese laissez-faire environmental problems keep on worsening over a long period,

the international community will take measures for intervention. And this intervention will be interference in its 'sovereignty'.

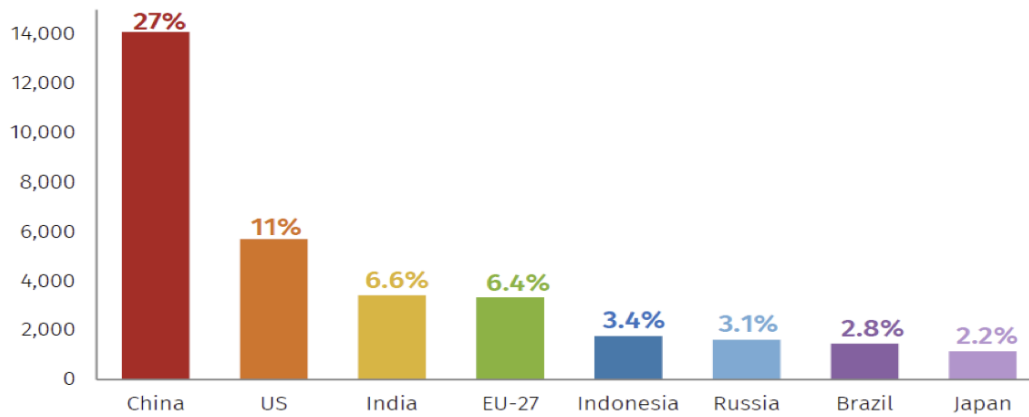
Two indigenous Chinese strategies are evident in China's climate change diplomacy: Deng Xiaoping's famous "24 characters" guideline for China's foreign policy from the early 1990s "keep a low profile and achieve something" (*taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei/韬光养晦有所作为*); and one of the ancient 36 stratagems, namely "exchanging the roles of host and guest" (*fan ke wei zhu/反客为主*) (Kaneti 2020: The Diplomat). The first strategy refers to "keeping a low profile and bide one's time" to achieve something, while the second one indicates taking a gradual approach to a situation, whereby an outsider or a guest creates an environment that allows him to slowly gain a position of respect, then move on to gain trust and be assigned to key roles, and finally overtake the role of a community leader. In the initial years of its participation in the international climate change negotiations, as mentioned in the above, China had skeptical view on climate change. Hardly a decade ago, China's leadership in climate change was beyond consideration. Then there were accusations on China of being 'laggard' or a 'spoiler'.

China has transitioned seamlessly from a 'free-rider' to an indispensable participant or the leader in the negotiations. As examined by Andrew Hurrell and Sandeep Sengupta, the global shift has an impact on international environmental politics. The analysis of the climate negotiations clearly shows that emerging power like China has acquired the place of veto player in the climate change talks. And it would be interesting to study how china's climate change diplomacy complies and integrates into the international climate change negotiations.

Chinese politics is undoubtedly subject to domestic and international contestation. China's changing stance in international discussions on carbon emissions touches on the two central pillars of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party: (a) Economic growth and (b) Public safety. For more than a decade, China's national gross GDP has grown at an average rate of 10 per cent each year. This economic growth has been possible at the cost of high GHGs emissions. The two-thirds of the energy source in China is coal. It is the world's largest coal producer and accounts for about half of coal consumed globally. The Chinese government banned the construction of new coal-fired power plants in 2016, and coal use appeared to decline. However, when the ban expired in 2018, construction of new plants ramped up again. In 2020, China built over three times more new coal-power capacity than the rest of the world combined, according to Global Energy Monitor and the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air (Maizland 2021). China's net coal-fired power generation capacity grew by about 30 gigawatts over the course of the year 2020, as opposed to a net decline of 17 gigawatts elsewhere in the world. China also has nearly 200 gigawatts worth of coal power projects under construction, approved for construction, or seeking permits. This clearly suggests China will remain reliant on coal for decades to come (Erickson and Collins 2021). Additionally, China alone contributed for more than 27 per cent of the total global emissions, far exceeding the second largest emitter, the US, which contributed nearly 11 per cent.

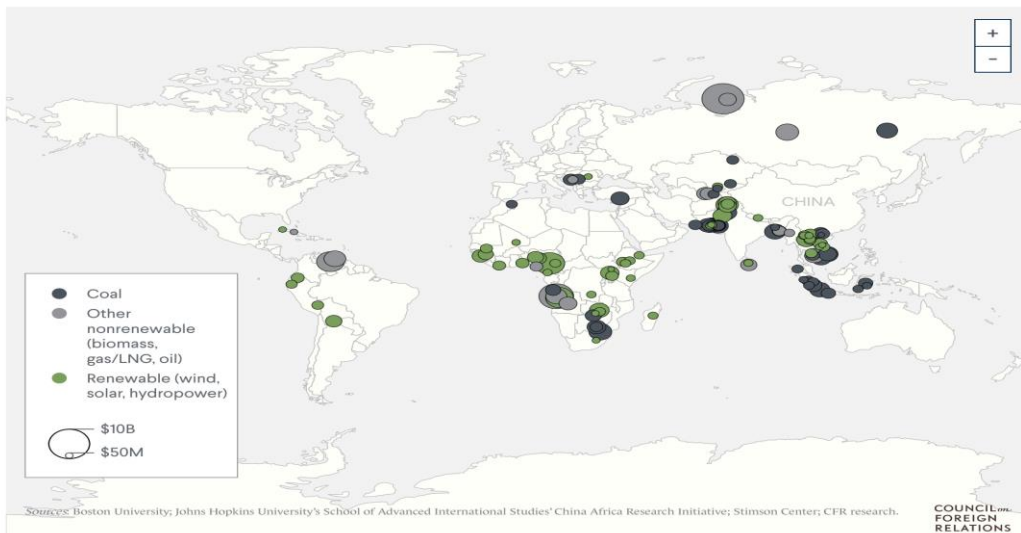
### 2019 net GHG emissions from the world's largest emitters

Million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e, including emissions and removals from land-use and forests and share of global total



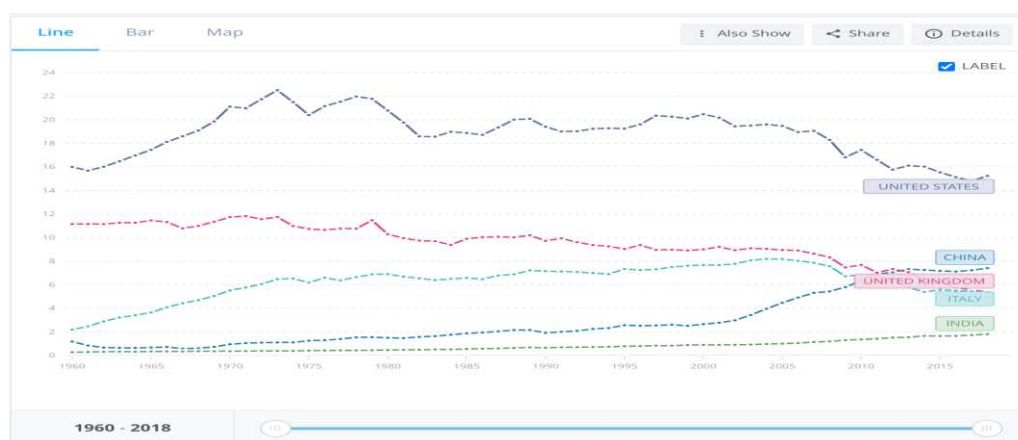
Source: Rhodium Group

Additionally, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes referred to as the New Silk Road, is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects. Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the vast collection of development and investment initiatives would stretch from East Asia to Europe, significantly expanding China's economic and political influence (Chatzky and McBride 2020). Through its massive BRI projects, China is promoting economic development in its western regions like Xinjiang Autonomous region and also securing long-term energy supplies from Central Asia and the Middle East, especially via routes that the United States cannot disrupt in future. Since its inception in 2013, more themes have been added to BRI's original framework. Green and low-carbon developments were mentioned in the BRI road map in 2015. Xi advocated green, low-carbon and sustainable developments at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) opening speech in 2017 and proposed to jointly establish the BRI International Green Development Coalition with the United Nations Environment Programme, which was officially established in 2019.



**Energy projects Financed by Chinese Banks in BRI Countries since 2013**

Surprisingly, China has built or is planning to build hundreds of coal-fired power plants in countries participating in the BRI, all around the world. More than 60 percent of BRI-specific energy financing has gone toward non-renewable resources. Greenhouse gas emissions in more than a dozen BRI countries have soared. Researchers found in 2019 that BRI could drive the global average temperature to increase by 2.7 degrees, significantly higher than the Paris Agreement’s goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C. Interestingly, the BRI flaunts China’s economic strength and its capacity to penetrate into different countries in the name of infrastructure and economic development. This in turn provides China with the access to resources in the partner countries and also provides it with a reliant market for its finished goods. Contrary to such significant strong and new posture in the global order, Beijing insists that its enormous population and relatively modest average income classify China as a less developed country. Also, that China should not be expected to curb its emissions at the rate of the developed countries. Evidently China with such a large population has always preferred the per-capita emission as the measurement. However, its per capita emission has already surpassed some of the developed nations like Italy and the UK.



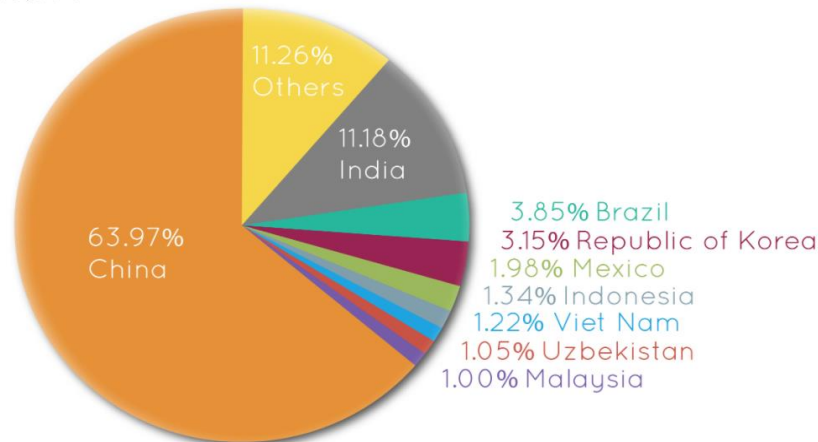
**Carbon Dioxide Emissions (Metric Tons per capita)**

Source: data.worldbank.org

Gørild Heggelund (2007) argues that China is unlikely to take commitments in near future. Energy is seen as the key to economic development and is one of the main causes of China’s unwillingness to take on emission reduction commitments. He demonstrates that CDM (The Clean Development Mechanism, defined in Article 12 of the Kyoto Protocol) is becoming China’s preferred strategy for participation under the Kyoto Protocol (instead of mandates)<sup>1</sup>. One of the general requirements for CDM project approval under the current Chinese arrangements is that the CDM project activity should promote the transfer of environment friendly technology. In addition, energy efficiency improvements and new and renewable energy are listed as priority areas for CDM cooperation. China started its first CDM project in 2005 and at present it has become the world’s leading supplier of the CERs. China’s share of the CERs is higher at 63.97 percent. China benefits from the wind projects enormously, but it has also gained from its hydroelectric, solar and biomass power projects under the CDM. As of the end of 2010, China led the world in installed wind capacity, with the United States a fairly close second. By the end of 2010, China had installed almost 45 gigawatts of wind turbines, while the United States had installed 40 gigawatts. China has been the biggest market for wind turbines for several years and has recently quadrupled its goals for solar installations. The International Energy Agency expected China to overtake Europe as the world’s top renewable energy growth market in 2012 (IER 2012).

<sup>1</sup>The CDM is a flexible mechanism established under the Kyoto Protocol. It allows developed countries to invest in greenhouse gas emission reduction projects in developing countries and to claim the resulting Certified Emission Reductions (CERs) to assist them in compliance with their binding greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments under the Protocol.

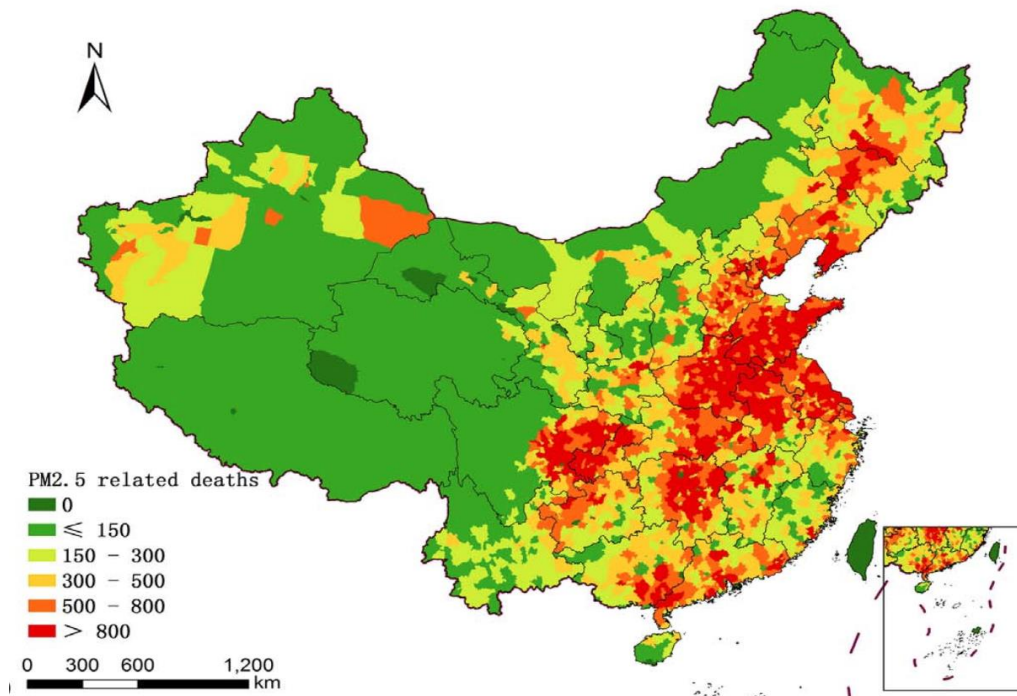
### Expected Annual Certified Emission Reductions from Registered CDM Projects



Source: <https://www.instituteforenergyresearch.org/>

The investing countries benefit from China's low marginal cost of carbon abatement. In return, there is transfer of state-of-the-art technology to China, which boosts China's scientific and technological progress. Additional revenues coming from the Certified Emission Reductions (CERs) provide help for sustainable development, increasing energy efficiency and protection of environment in China. These projects assist in start-up of domestic industries, including clean coal fired power plants, and also support and accelerate the development of renewable and clean energy. In general, the central government's main goals are technology progress and broader contributions to sustainable development, rather than merely attracting additional foreign investment (Ye and Jian 2011: 206).

Public health is another major concern in shaping China's position in the international climate change debates. Being the largest GHGs emitter, China also faces crisis of severe air pollution, and additional impacts of environmental degradation like water scarcity and soil contamination. In 2007, the World Bank estimated the number of Chinese killed every year by pollution to be 750,000, however this figure was scrubbed due to pressure from the Chinese government. *Forbes* reported that in 2016 China led the world in number of deaths attributable to air pollution, with 1.58 million deaths. In spite of the Chinese government's objections, the US Embassy in October 2010 tweeted that Beijing's air was "crazy bad," twenty times the WHO's guidelines. It was not until February 2012 that the government agreed to the demand of improving its environmental monitoring and added PM2.5 to a more restrictive set of standards.



#### PM2.5 Related Deaths

Source: <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0160412017302969?token=26069CB8D6051742BEBB78891B2A4E7603D2A3C4BBD25BC06184ABB87AD55A64A896EFC7B4857E17DEA8EB6BF564A4C7&originRegion=eu-west-1&originCreation=20210924071425>

As high levels of air pollution threatened public health, the Chinese government initially tried to suppress the domestic awareness and criticism on the issue. However, individual efforts to draw attention to the crisis was also witnessed within China. A resident of Beijing took the picture of the same building at the same time of the day for one year and posted it online. These photos made the issue of bad quality air in Beijing undeniable. It also encouraged others to do the same. A former CCTV journalist, Chai Jing self-funded a documentary titled, *Under the Dome*, which featured China's severe pollution problem. She is believed to have gone ahead to make this documentary after her daughter developed a tumor, which she blames on air pollution. This documentary garnered more than 100 million views in just 48 hours before it was censored by the authorities. The documentary has already reached its target audience and ignited a national debate across China on an issue prevailing in China for years. The public outcry on the degrading environment cannot escape the attention of the government.

An authoritarian government like China, closely sees the issue of the impact of degrading environment on public health as an issue affecting its survival prospect. The domestic centrality of the problem made Chinese government to shift gears. The term "clear waters and green mountains" was first coined in 2005 by Xi Jinping who was the Zhejiang Party Secretary then. Then the term "ecological civilization", was used by President Hu Jintao in 2007. This term has been used for several times in the 13<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2016-2020), which also sets the share of non-fossil-based energy in the country's primary energy mix at 15 per cent by 2020. As Hu Angang, a public policy professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, believes that it is in China's national interest to accept GHGs emission targets. The direct effects of climate change can be on water resources, forestry, agricultural productivity, and human settlement. China's 32,000 km coastline is densely populated and highly developed. This region can be considered as a lifeline of China's economic growth and is the most threatened region due to climate change impact which has led to sea-level rise. With the growing intensity and the frequency of the natural calamities all around the globe, it is very clear that there is some serious imbalance that the mankind has brought to the environment. China which is undergoing such a rapid economic growth and holds such a large portion of mankind needs to seriously focus on the issue. The period of denial has passed and it has



become imperative for China to develop its environmental policy which will help in making its growth more sustainable.

### **High Aspirations, Higher Targets and Domestic Authoritarian Environmentalism**

After the ideas for a “new era” for his nation were enshrined in the constitution is the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, President Xi Jinping is believed to have solidified more power than any other leader since Mao Zedong. Under his leadership China has made some of the most ambitious pledges like peaking the emissions by 2030 and becoming carbon-neutral by 2060. He also called for the creation of an “ecological civilization”. In the face of severe environmental crisis, the strong leadership and the huge international commitments undoubtedly calls for environmental authoritarianism in China. As a matter of fact, the Chinese government under the leadership of President Xi Jinping has made it very clear that the environmental issues in China will be tackled on its own terms. Also, Xi administration has not been hesitant to clamp down any popular environmental campaign that threatens the social stability or Communist Party regime.

The latent concept of authoritarian environmentalism was articulated first by Heilbroner, who believed that ‘an absence of inhibitions with respect to the exercise of power’ and limits on the freedom of speech would be needed to control population growth (Gilley 2012:288). As the environmental issues started becoming severe year after year, and eventually impacted almost everyone, the policy outcomes are usually supposed to take some stringent measures to address the issue and, also to limit the freedom of the citizens. The absence of public participation is at the heart of the authoritarian environmentalism. In case of China, the economic rise is unprecedented in human history, and its impact on the natural environment is also quite large. In its process of becoming the manufacturing hub of the world, China has polluted its air, water, and soil. These pollutions have started impacting the health of a large population. Severe diseases like cancer, lungs related ailments are highly on the rise in different areas of China. Apart from this, China also faces challenges of natural calamities like flood, desertification, and sandstorms which again threatens a large part of the Chinese population. Another unique characteristic of China’s environmental policy, as compared to other developed economies, is that formulation and implementation of the policies usually have top to bottom approach. Therefore, there is no significant participation from the grassroots level. The decentralised authoritarian political structure further challenges the implementation of the environmental policies effectively. High domestic heterogeneity has characterized China’s engagement with international efforts to address climate change, with particular opposition from polluting industries and the local governments that benefit from those revenues (Weiss and Wallace 2021: 654). Eventually, the much-appreciated targets, set by the central leadership like the pledge to peak its emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, with China currently running 1,058 coal plants - more than half the world’s capacity, are often bound to be missed.

In addition to this, China also lacks effective institutional mechanism to address the issues faced by the masses. Many cases filed by the individuals in the court against the rising pollution in the region, goes unheard. Elizabeth Economy writes that this lack of an effective institutional mechanism for the Chinese people to participate in the environmental policy-making process or to get redress through the legal system has translated into a vibrant environmental protest movement in China. Mark Beeson (2010), believes these unrests somehow threaten the stability of the government, whose authority is highly dependent on the continuation of the remarkable growth. In such circumstances, the options for governments may become increasingly constrained and unpalatable. Thus, the environmental issues pose great challenges to the Communist Party leadership in China.

We also witness lesser participation of the civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from the Chinese side in the policy making and international climate change negotiations. Looking back, in the first decade of the twenty-first century environmental civil society enjoyed more space. But under Xi Jinping the space for environmental NGOs (ENGOS) has become increasingly confined,

particularly since the new Chinese Foreign NGO Law came into effect in 2017. NGO registration processes have become much more difficult for domestic and foreign ENGOs and they are under increasing pressure to enter alliances with government-run NGOs (so called GONGOs) such that experts suggest that we see a hollowing out of the non-governmental nature of ENGOs in China (Huang 2017). China's NGOs must abide by the political conditions of China and focus on cooperating with the government and companies and educating the public about climate change' (B Gilley 2012: 291). It is worth noting that Friends of Nature was the first environmental NGO in China. And because its first president, Liang Congjie, was a member of the National Political Consultative Conference (NPCC), it has a unique connection to the state, allowing it to become an active and influential policy entrepreneur (Jeong and Wu 200). The limited participation of NGOs and citizens in governance processes creates doubts about the effectiveness of China's emerging environmental state in the long term (Kostka and Zhang 2018:772).

This non-participation of the civil society is one of the two dimensions of the concept of 'authoritarian environmentalism', suggested by Beeson. The other dimension is the 'decrease in individual liberty' which includes surveillance, forceful relocation of nomads in the western regions of China in the name of 'ecological migration' or 'green grabbing' by the authorities. To be sure, the phenomenon of rapid economic growth without political liberalization comes at a high price. The absence of civil liberties for ordinary Chinese citizens is perhaps the most obvious and egregious of these costs (Perry and Haeilmann 2011: 2). With the high aspirations and targets, China justifies such measures as necessary steps to mitigate climate change. However, if the vulnerability issue that China faces is not addressed, China is undoubtedly going to face serious challenges domestically and also at the international climate change negotiations.

## **Conclusion**

China's climate change diplomacy has manifested both continuity and transition in its nature. The above analysis of China's environmental diplomacy particularly since the Kyoto Protocol clearly indicates that, the issues such as sovereignty, capitalistic economic growth, and international prestige are central. As China's economy grows, the issue of pollution within China and the domestic politics shapes China's position at the international climate change regime. Thus, it is the domestic politics which decides if China should engage with or commit to or reshape the international climate change commitments. It is evident that China uses its environmental diplomacy as an effective tool in promoting its national interests. China uses socio-economic development to defend its position at the international stage. However, the way China has been putting forth its strong position to show its presence in the 'global commons', the BRI initiative, and its willingness to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, clearly depict the growing impact of China in the global politics. And it indeed demands China to be more concerned about the domestic as well as the global environmental concerns. The domestic environmental concerns, dissatisfaction and health concerns of its citizens further makes it essential for China to accept the fact that the issue of environmental degradation needs to be effectively addressed. If not, it can seriously threaten some of the China's national interests and its stability. There are instances which indicate that China is using its environmental means to further its authoritarian goals. Additionally, the aspiration of becoming a "middle income country" requires either the doubling or tripling of the GDP. And in September 2020 President Xi had set a goal of China attaining "carbon neutrality" by 2060. The practical ability and willingness of China to meet these goals is questionable. And this further pushes for the implementation of 'authoritarian environmentalism' as the means to achieve these goals.



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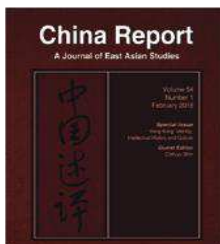


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