

Introduction

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In December 2009, diplomats will meet in Copenhagen to finalize what many hope will be a strong agreement to fight global warming and climate change. They will grapple with how to address these problems in light of new scientific findings showing that the adverse effects of global warming are happening sooner and are more severe than scientists predicted only a year or two ago. Some countries, notably in Europe, have started to take serious steps to limit and in several cases reduce their emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. However, those efforts have been very slow in coming, and any politically realistic scenarios for action by industrialized countries in the next decade or two will be swamped by increasing emissions from the developing world.

One reason for the world's slow and weak response to climate change is a game of "you go first" being played between rich and poor countries, particularly between China and the United States. Both of these latter countries now agree that much more needs to be done. The United States no longer denies the problem, and China has come to acknowledge its major role. At the same time, China rightly expects the United States and other wealthy countries to do much more to reduce their pollution and provide aid to help developing countries grow more sustainably and cope with the effects of climate change. After all, China's average per capita emissions of greenhouse gases remain well below those in the developed world.

However, owing to its large population and rapid economic growth, China's emissions are ballooning. It has overtaken the United States to become the most polluting country in the world, and within the next twenty years or so its emissions of carbon dioxide will account for nearly one-third of the global total.

Three Dilemmas

How can the world reconcile China's new status as the largest polluter of the atmosphere with its justifiable expectations for continued economic development? In answering this question, we might start by thinking about three dilemmas presented by a rising China:

A Practical Dilemma

China's efforts to limit its carbon dioxide emissions, while commendable, are nowhere near enough to actually start reducing national emissions. Pollution will increase, albeit at a somewhat slower rate, as China's economy grows. Without much more robust action by China in the near future, efforts in the West to prevent the worst effects of climate change will fail. Industrialized countries are understandably not enthusiastic about doing what is necessary, including implementing economically and politically disruptive policies at home, if their efforts will be in vain. Thus, avoiding concrete and measurable action is no longer a practical option for China – at least not if the world is to make substantial progress in fighting climate change this century.

An Ethical Dilemma

China has argued for decades that developing countries should not be required to limit their development to fix a problem caused by the industrialized world. Its argument that rich

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countries should substantially reduce their greenhouse pollution and provide developing countries with aid to address climate change seems unassailable. The rich countries caused the problem and they ought to fix it before requiring developing countries to act. But this argument applies only if we think narrowly in terms of governments and states. If we think in terms of *people*, China's argument is much weaker. After all, many millions of Chinese are now living affluent lifestyles akin to those of people in the West. If it is wrong for Londoners and New Yorkers to pollute the atmosphere, it must be wrong for affluent people in Hong Kong and Shanghai to do so, too.²

A Political Dilemma

While industrialized countries are indeed responsible for most of the climate change problem today, millions of affluent Chinese are responsible for much of the problem in the future. It may be politically impossible for Western governments to ask their citizens to change their lifestyles substantially, and to pay more for energy, when those people are bombarded with television images of Chinese joining the global consumer class – something for which the Chinese government is rightly proud, but which has profoundly negative consequences for the global environment.

Beijing's Leadership?

How can we escape these dilemmas? The solution to the "you go first" mentality of climate change diplomacy may be found in an acknowledgment by Beijing that not all Chinese are the same. Some of them have a responsibility to act now to fight climate change even if China as a state continues to reject such a responsibility. Put another way, all of China need not wait until Americans and Australians go first. Affluent people in China can act alongside the majority of Americans and Australians. Most Chinese people will continue to use more energy, as is their right, but the most affluent among them will have to cut back alongside most Westerners.

China can be a leader on climate change without limiting its development. By formally agreeing to have some of its most well off people act in the fight against climate change, China can break the diplomatic deadlock and remove the last excuse that Western governments have used to avoid fulfilling their responsibilities. By doing so, Beijing would send a powerful message around the world

Thus Beijing may hold the key to a future in which the Earth's climate is more benign than many scientists fear – but only if affluent people in China accept that they are part of the problem.

² For extensive elaboration on this point, see Paul G. Harris, *World Ethics and Climate Change: From International to Global Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, in press).