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From Paris to Beijing: China, Next Champion on Climate Change?

By Fengshi Wu

Synopsis

Despite ups and downs in climate diplomacy, China has been consistent in reforming energy related sectors and implementing climate-related policies at home in the past two decades. This explains why China shows no hesitation in moving along with the Paris Agreement regardless of US participation.

Commentary

A FREQUENT question that tends to surface at climate-related forums these days is what could happen to the Paris Agreement on climate change and how China would respond should America pull out. As the world waits for the United States to clarify its position on climate change, China has not tempered its international commitments or domestic policies on energy efficiency, renewable energy and carbon emission reduction. For example, the country is still set to open the world's largest national carbon trade scheme in the second half of 2017.

In a month's time, the Paris Agreement will enter the phase of negotiating and settling the details for implementation, and the process will last for two years. China's chief climate negotiator, Xie Zhenhua, in a recent interview with the Chinese media, stated: "We are preparing diligently [for the upcoming Paris Agreement negotiations]. We will come up with a Chinese proposal on every major issue. In the past, we mostly responded to others' proposals. From now on, we will put forward our own proposals proactively."

China and Global Governance in Climate Change

Xie's firm language sounds consistent with President Xi Jinping's new foreign policies and global strategies and signals a sharp turn in China's climate diplomacy.

Environmental protection was one of the first fields where the People's Republic started to fully participate in global governance. Participating in the negotiation of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in the early 1980s not only led to valuable technological and financial assistance to China, but also provided rare opportunities for Chinese diplomats to learn about negotiating regime building for global public affairs.

However, China's experience in global climate change governance has not been a smooth ride. In the late 1980s, China was among the first group of developing countries that paid regular attention to the issue and attended most international negotiations. Once the country's economy and energy consumption took off dramatically in early 2000s, and its carbon emissions exceeded the US around mid-2000s, China, nevertheless, turned into a major target of criticism at international climate negotiation tables. The 2009 COP15 in Copenhagen witnessed a bad fallout between the Chinese delegation (headed by then premier Wen Jiabao) and OECD countries.

Four years later, history took another turn when China announced an absolute cap on its carbon emissions (starting in 2016), and to peak its carbon emissions by 2030. At the Paris COP in 2015, China joined the world and signed up for the new mechanism of global carbon governance with specified and voluntary-based Intended Nationally Determined Contributions.

Domestic Interests in Climate-Related Cooperation

Unlike the rocky patterns of its climate diplomacy, reforms at home have been consistently carried out by the Chinese government since the beginning of the 2000s. These targeted lower energy intensity, higher portfolio of renewable energy, upgrading energy sector, increasing carbon sink capacity, and introducing market-based mechanisms for carbon reductions.

For example, premier Wen Jiabao took particular interest in developing wind energy during his two terms. Within a decade by 2010, China owned four out of the top ten most competitive wind turbine manufacturers, and became the country with the largest total capacity and highest growth rate of wind power in the world.

In the early 2000s, China's goal of renewable portfolio was 15% (of total national energy production) by 2015. But, China surpassed this goal and installed power capacity from renewables (including hydro, wind, solar, bio-mass and nuclear) reached 25% in 2012. Having substantially reduced the costs for renewable energy production, China now produces 26% of global total installed power from renewables and expands its global market shares in renewables. Considering its longtime dependency on coal, these shifts towards energy diversification and low-carbon intensity have significant implications for China's economic future and overall sustainability.

According to Xie Zhenhua, China also accomplished 15 billion cubic metres of afforestation and reforestation, reaching the 2020 goals earlier than planned. Such forestry-related projects will not only contribute to global-level climate mitigation, but, more importantly, help China to alleviate chronic environmental problems such as desertification, land degradation and biodiversity loss.

Since the Kyoto Protocol era, the Chinese government has been able to identify and tap into the specific areas of international cooperation that will not only lead to emissions reductions and financial support but also bring in technological advancement and innovation. The G20 Research Group also noted that in spite of an underwhelming record of compliance in the fields of energy and climate, China has been particularly welcoming and consistent in implementing decisions that facilitate technology transfer.

Next Climate Change Champion?

As the tides of nationalism and political conservatism rise in the West, the world may turn to other centres for leadership and inspiration. In fact, the Paris Agreement was reached without American leadership, or any particular form of unilateral diplomatic championship.

Under Xi Jinping China has made no secret that it aspires to bigger roles on the global stage, including taking on leadership in global governance and multilateral cooperation. Xi's recent speech at Davos World Economic Forum, though a little ironic, came as a timely boost for international trade and economic cooperation.

In the case of climate change, should China become the next champion, this is not only because it seeks international status, but there is also concrete convergence of domestic interests and international commitments. Decades of participation in the global debate on climate change and in domestic research and innovation have convinced Chinese policymakers the long-term value of green energy, energy efficiency and afforestation, and international climate cooperation.

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