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Raise the green lantern

Has China turned from champion polluter to Captain Planet?

December 2015 saw climate change jump to the top of the international political agenda when world leaders endorsed the Paris Climate Agreement. Criticised by a number of scientists for falling far short of the measures needed to prevent rampant global warming, the deal was nonetheless trumpeted by world leaders. In contrast to the failed Copenhagen summit six years earlier, Paris saw 200 countries commit to keeping global warming "well below" the 2C threshold.

Perhaps the biggest win for the Paris negotiators was securing Chinese ratification. Back in Copenhagen, developed countries such as Japan and Canada refused to commit to legally binding targets after 2012. Meanwhile China rejected global emissions targets for developing countries. No-one saw eye to eye. Now, however, the Asian superpower appears to have made a volte-face when it comes to climate politics.

“We will unwaveringly pursue sustainable development and stay committed... to China’s fundamental policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment,” China’s president Xi Jin-Ping later told business leaders.

Other countries have been quick to praise China’s new-found enthusiasm for all things green. British economist Lord Nicholas Stern says China is now leading the world in action on climate change, as it shifts from coal to wind and solar power. The country of almost 1.4 billion people is also investing heavily in green, low-carbon technology, and hopes to become a leader in this field.

President Xi’s high-profile appearance at the Paris climate summit, the announcement that China’s emissions would peak by 2030 and then fall, the launch of a national carbon market for 2017 and the offer of 3.1 billion USD of south-south climate funding all add to the impression that China is on the side of the good guys. It has shifted from intensity-based climate targets - comparing emissions to economic output - to absolute targets; from insisting that only developed countries provide

climate finance to supporting the global south in its efforts to reduce emissions. China has also enhanced its bilateral climate efforts. In 2014 and 2015, it signed a series of joint declarations with major countries and regions, including the US, UK, France, Germany, EU, India, and Brazil.

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So why the sudden U-turn?

China is concerned about its image abroad. Its international climate stance reflects the Xi administration's overall strategy of presenting China as a responsible great power keen to participate in global governance.

The US-China climate agenda is another key driver for China's shift in attitude. It sees its relationship with the US as crucial to own regional relations, and to its future as a world power. Under Barack Obama's presidency, the US pushed global warming to the top of its agenda in talks with China.

Most importantly, China's domestic interests are increasingly aligning with international demands for action on climate change. In China's major cities, smog is both visible and deadly. A study by Tsinghua University, Seattle's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and the University of British Columbia found that coal combustion accounted for 366,000 premature deaths in China in 2013 alone. Numerous food and water scandals have hit headlines in recent months and spread like wildfire over Chinese social media – prompting concern over social and political unrest.

2016 saw China assuming the G20 presidency for the first time, bringing Beijing to the centre stage of global economic and financial governance, and allowing it to flex its diplomatic muscles. It place climate, energy, and sustainable development high on the group's agenda.

During Barack Obama's presidency, the US pushed

A breakthrough came when the US and China made a joint announcement on ratifying the

global warming to the top of its agenda in talks with China.

Paris Agreement, a day ahead of the G20 summit in September 2016. The timing was carefully chosen to inject positive momentum into both the summit and the UN climate negotiations. This brought the number of countries having ratified to 26, and their share of emissions to 39 per cent, a big step forward towards reaching the 55 percent threshold required to put the climate deal into force. China's quick response put pressure on other major players such as the EU, Canada and India, who followed suit and ratified at the beginning of October, with the Paris Agreement officially entering into force on 4 November 2016. The unexpected election of a climate change denier to the White House has, however, thrown the global deal into uncertainty.

China also set up a new Green Finance Study Group (GFSG) under G20, co-chaired by the People's Bank of China and the Bank of England, with support from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as its secretariat.

Despite all the commitments and huge advances in green technology, China still faces an uphill struggle when it comes to protecting the environment and reducing emissions. Its coal power sector, for example, still accounts for almost two thirds of China's energy mix. Meanwhile, provincial and local governments are motivated primarily by their GDP growth rate, and frequently prioritise heavy industry and large infrastructure projects over sustainable development.

China has promised to provide its citizens with blue sky, clean water and safe food. It is increasingly engaged in shaping the international climate agenda, whilst attempting to reconcile the demands of economic growth and environmental protection at home. Even the most optimistic observers would call Paris just a first step.



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