

COUNTRY REPORT: THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Chinese Government's Latest Position on Global Environmental Issues

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Introduction

As the world's most populous country and a leading economic power, China has a natural place at the heart of global dialogue and cooperation. China is growing fast and, as it grows, it is faced with urgent environmental challenges. Climate change, species loss, pollution, water scarcity and environment damage are not problems confined to one country: they are challenges that concern all the world's citizens, but the rise of China gives them a new urgency.¹ The impact on the global environment created by China's economic growth has resulted in widespread concern in the rest of the world. So what is the view of the Chinese government towards global environmental problems?

China's first foray into the international environmental arena was at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (the Stockholm Conference). China's "open door" policy commenced 1978. Since then, China has gradually become an active player in international environmental law-making process. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from 20 to 22 June 2012. The Chinese government published its third National Report on Sustainable Development in 2012 (hereinafter 2012 National Report) immediately prior to the Rio+20 conference.² Chapters 7 (International Cooperation) and 8 (Principles and Positions) of the 2012 National Report provide Chinese government's latest positions on global environmental issues. This report introduces and comments on the 2012 National Report.

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¹ <http://www.chinadialogue.net/static/about>.

² China published its first National Report on Sustainable Development in 1997, just before the Earth Summit Rio+5. The second National Report on Sustainable Development was published in 2002, before the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth Summit Johannesburg 2002).

2012 National Report on Sustainable Development

Cooperation with Developing Countries

For decades the Chinese government has been promoting the transfer of funding and technology from developed countries to developing countries for the protection of the environment. In the 2012 National Report, the Chinese government for the first time published its cooperation projects with other developing countries. This shows that the Chinese government has recognized China's changing role as an economic power and the consequent need to take more responsibility to deal with global environmental problems. However, it is believed by the Chinese government that economic development and poverty alleviation are the primary tasks for developing countries. Poverty can be seen as one major cause of deterioration of the environment in developing countries.

To 2010, the Chinese government had offered zero tariff treatment on more than 60% of products from 38 of the least developed countries.³ The Chinese government had also provided other developing countries 287 billion yuan of financial assistance. 30 billion yuan of debt owed by 50 heavily indebted poor countries and least developed countries has also been waived by the Chinese government.⁴ In recent years, in order to help other developing countries cope with the international financial crisis, the Chinese government has provided some African countries with 10 billion U.S. dollars in preferential loans, and committed to providing 15 billion U.S. dollars in credit to the least developed country members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar) to support their infrastructure construction projects.⁵ China has also signed "Memorandums of Understanding on Poverty Reduction Cooperation" with Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and other Latin American countries to jointly promote the eradication of poverty.⁶

Moreover, the Chinese government has conducted personnel training programs for developing countries in more than 20 areas such as agriculture, health, education, economics and environmental protection. By 2010, a total of 130,000 management and technical personnel in developing countries had been trained in China.⁷ China signed documents such as "the Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in Technology and

³ Para.2, Section 1, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 72-73.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Para.4, Section 1, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 73.

Mechanism Concerning Africa's Environment", and "the Implementation Agreement of Environmental Cooperation Projects in Africa" in order to promote cooperation among developing countries.⁸

Cooperation with Developed Countries

The Chinese government has established a regular exchange and cooperation mechanism with developed countries in environmental protection, climate change, energy and resource conservation and sustainable use and disaster prevention, so as to jointly promote global sustainable development.

China has signed several memoranda of understanding with developed countries such as the United States, Canada, the European Union, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Singapore on building energy efficiency, green buildings and low-carbon eco-cities.⁹ One recent example is the "*Memorandum of Understanding on the Continuous Cooperation in Energy Saving and Environmental Protection*" signed by China and Japan. China maintains dialogue on environmental protection issues with several developed countries. For example, in 2001, China and the EU agreed to establish a ministerial-level dialogue mechanism on China-EU environmental policies and so far the ministerial meetings have been held four times. In 2008, China and the United States held the fourth Strategic Economic Dialogue and signed a "*Ten-Year Framework for Cooperation on Energy and Environment*". In addition, China has established the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development to study the major issues surrounding the environment and development, and to share and spread successful international experience.

China and International Organizations

China is willing to be actively involved in the activities of various international organizations and institutions.¹⁰ China is interested in strengthening multilateral international exchanges and cooperation on environmental protection.¹¹ Attracting funds and technologies from international organizations and institutions are important for China's economic and social sustainable development.¹²

⁸ Para.5, Section 1, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 73.

⁹ Para.2, Section 2, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 74.

¹⁰ Para.1, Section 3, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 75.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

China benefits hugely from working together with international organizations on environmental protection. China has made full use of loans from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and other financial organizations, to build a large number of demonstration projects covering the fields of agriculture, forestry, soil and water, energy, environment, urban construction, disaster prevention and mitigation.¹³ From 2001 to 2010, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) approved a total of 77 projects in China and promised 565 million U.S. dollars in grants to improve the ability of China to comply with international environmental conventions.¹⁴ In addition, the Chinese government has also worked with United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and was granted more than 20 million U.S. dollars.¹⁵

Chinese Government Views on Sustainable Development

In the 2012 National Report, much attention is paid to the concept of 'green economy'. It is believed that a green economy is positive for the alleviation of poverty in developing countries.¹⁶ However, it is emphasized that developed countries should take the lead on developing green economies and set a model for developing countries. Moreover, developed countries should help developing countries to establish a green economy by providing funds, technology, capacity building and widening market access for goods from developing countries.¹⁷ The international community should take all necessary measures to compensate the cost of economic transition towards a green economy in developing countries.¹⁸ Furthermore, the concept of the "green economy" should not be used as an excuse for trade barriers or a prerequisite for providing funding or technology.¹⁹

It is suggested by the Chinese government that an effective institutional framework for sustainable development is important for the full implementation of "Agenda 21" and "the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development" and the response to new and emerging challenges.²⁰ Such an institutional framework should coordinate economic development, social development and environmental protection, increase the

¹³ Para.3, Section 3, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 75.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Para.2, Section 1, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Para.3, Section 1, Chapter8, 2012 National Report, 82.

¹⁹ Para.4, Section 1, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 82.

²⁰ Para.5, Section 1, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 82.

voice and decision-making power of developing countries and solve their practical difficulties concerning capital, technology and capacity building.²¹

When it comes to how to establish an effective institutional framework, the focus is upon the role of the United Nations (UN). The core leadership role must be given to the UN.²² The policy guidance and coordination functions of the UN need to be strengthened, so that it can coordinate and guide various agencies of the international community, multilateral institutions and control treaty mechanisms to take consistent actions for sustainable development.²³ The existing role of the UN's specialized agencies should be strengthened as well.²⁴ For example, the role of the United Nations Economic and Social Council and the Commission on Sustainable Development should be strengthened so as to promote the implementation of *Agenda 21 and the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development*.²⁵ The role of United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) should be enhanced in global environmental governance and more capital and technical support ought to be rendered to it.²⁶

China is also willing to contribute to multi-level global environmental governance. The report argues that "*Agenda 21*" should be used as the basic framework to strengthen governance, encourage all states to develop their comprehensive strategies to strengthen the coordination of various government departments, and mobilize public participation and improve the implementation capacity.²⁷ It is suggested that international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization and multilateral development banks should incorporate the agenda on sustainable development into their planning and projects, and coordinate and cooperate with relevant UN bodies to form synergies and support the sustainable development governance at the regional, national and local levels.²⁸

²¹ Ibid.

²² Para.6, Section 1, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 83.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Para.7, Section 1, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 83.

²⁸ Ibid.

Selected Specific Issues

Funding and Transfer of Technology

Transfer of funding and technology from developed countries is always a policy priority. It is stated that the international community should take full account of the differences between developing countries and developed countries in terms of development stages and basic needs.²⁹ It is necessary to establish and implement long-term, effective funding and technology transfer mechanisms between developed and developing countries.³⁰

Water

China adopted a stringent water management system³¹ on 12 January 2012. China's objective is to achieve rational development, efficient use, comprehensive management, optimal allocation, comprehensive conservation, protection and scientific management of water resources.³² In the mean time, China hopes that developed countries will support developing countries and improve developing countries' capacity to cope with flood and drought disasters and achieve sustainable hydrological development.³³

Ocean

In relation to ocean governance, China hopes that the UN could encourage member states to develop and implement sustainable marine development strategies in line with their national conditions; take joint actions to ensure the fair, sustainable use of marine resources; and maintain or restore the structure and functions of marine ecosystems.³⁴ The international community should support the development of the marine economies of developing countries.³⁵ It is also necessary for developed countries to cooperate with developing countries in the restoration of marine ecosystems, the protection of the marine environment, and responses to sea level rise and ocean disaster prevention and reduction,

²⁹ Para.1, Section 2, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 83.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ State Council's Opinion on the Implementation of the most stringent water management system, State Council of P. R. China Gazette, 6 (2012), 5-8.

³² Para.6, Section 2, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 85.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Para.7, Section 2, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 85.

³⁵ Ibid.

with an aim of improving the capacity of developing countries in relation to the sustainable use of marine resources.³⁶

Climate Change

China is fully supportive of *the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* and *the Kyoto Protocol*. China follows the principles of fairness and “common but differentiated responsibilities”. Declarations have been made that developed countries should take the responsibility for their historical emissions and current high per capita emissions and make a change to their unsustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns.³⁷ Developed countries should take the lead in substantially reducing greenhouse gas emissions, ensure a proper space for development for developing countries, and at the same time, provide funds and transfer technology to the developing countries.³⁸ Developing countries also need to take active measures and actions for climate change mitigation and adaptation. It is believed that mitigation and adaptation should be given equal attention for dealing with climate change.³⁹

It is also admitted by the Chinese government that China benefits greatly from the international cooperation on the reduction of GHG emissions. By 2010, China had ratified 3,241 clean development mechanism projects, of which 1,718 projects successfully registered with the United Nations Clean Development Mechanism Executive Board.⁴⁰ For the registered projects, the certified emission reductions are expected to be about 351 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalence, accounting for 63.78% of the global total.⁴¹

Biodiversity

Sovereignty issues surrounding biodiversity within China's jurisdiction are not addressed in the 2012 National Report. It is only mentioned that biological diversity conservation is a common responsibility of mankind.⁴² It is reaffirmed that developed countries should support developing countries in biodiversity conservation without mentioning any specific

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Para.8, Section 2, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Para.4, Section 4, Chapter 7, 2012 National Report, 79.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Para.10, Section 2, Chapter 8, 2012 National Report, 86.

suggestions such as transfer of funding and technology.⁴³ The Chinese government is also willing to promote research and development of sustainable development technologies of biological resources to realize the scientific and rational use of biological resources, and promote the access to and benefit-sharing of biological genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge.⁴⁴

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese government has always seen China as a developing country. The transfer of funding and technology from developed to developing countries has been China's key concern. It hopes to gain more funding, technology and other capacity building resources from developed countries so as to improve its work on environmental protection. For example, regarding climate change, the Chinese government has insisted that developed countries bear more responsibility for the reduction of GHG emissions. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has argued that developed countries should provide funding and technology to help developing countries establish a green economy. However the 2012 National Report, for the first time, does not criticize developed countries for not fulfilling their obligations to help developing countries. The Report also acknowledges that China benefits significantly from international environmental cooperation. Moreover, willingness has also been expressed to assist other developing countries.

The Chinese government's stance on the relationship between environmental protection and economic development is clear: economic development has been the priority for decades. Since it first adopted its market reform and open door policies, the belief in China has been that a good economy provides the foundation for better environmental protection. Although China would like to avoid the western model of 'pollution first, restoration later', it has failed to create a new path to develop the economy while protecting the environment.

To some extent, developed countries are responsible for their historical emissions and should play a lead role in promoting a greener economic model. Meanwhile, it is time for China to make a more significant contribution to combating global warming and other environmental problems. Domestically, it is essential for China to pay more than lip service to environmental protection and the concept of sustainable development.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.