

# China's Participation in Global Climate Governance: Reflections and prospects



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# Introduction

Theoretically, the following three factors will eventually determine China to take a more active global climate policy/action: 1) the total amount of China's emission, which has evident negative effects on itself as well as the globe; 2) the demonstration effects of the developed countries, who convincingly and fruitfully implement the international conventions and make other own endeavors; 3) the ever-enhancing national eco-awareness, which reaches a point strong enough to support a policy-reorientation.



# Introduction

Under such a framework, I will offer a review of China's participation in global climate governance by focusing on the following three questions:

- 1) How to conceptualize China's participation in global climate governance: its policy as well as ethical dimensions;
- 2) How to interpret the heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China;
- 3) How to evaluate China's current efforts moving towards a new stage of participation.



# Conceptualizing China's participation in global climate governance

1972-1992

1992-2015

2015-2030

participation  
as an outsider

passive  
participation

active  
participation

no  
obligation  
(Moral resp.)

non-binding  
obligation  
(M/Political)

binding  
obligation  
(M/P/Legal)



# Conceptualizing China's participation in global climate governance

1) During 1972-1992, though the Chinese government participated lots of international activities coping with global environmental issues, China was commonly considered as an outsider participant in the sense that there is not much to blame, politically and legally in particular, because of the **development (or poverty eradication) priority** comparing with environmental protection.



## Conceptualizing China's participation in global climate governance

2) During 1992-2012, according to the Kyoto Protocol, China as a developing country has only non-binding obligation in industrial emission reduction, while as a rising new economic entity, throughout this period it experienced an ever-increasing international pressure to show some active responsibility. In the double senses, China is a **passive** participant, with **moral/political** responsibility.



## Conceptualizing China's participation in global climate governance

3) After 2012, with reflecting the Copenhagen defeat as a turning point, together with the spilling-over effects of domestic politics, it seems that China intends to replace the strategy of rejecting any obligation-binding international treaty with a new one—to be an **active** participant in constructing a post-Kyoto system, including to take some binding obligations or **full responsibility**(M/P/L).



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

- 1) Maintaining the Kyoto two-track system rather than replacing it with a single-track one in international negotiation for emission reduction;
- 2) The developed countries should undertake major responsibilities in global allocation of emission reduction quota and provide the developing countries with substantial aids in clean technologies and financial resources;
- 3) Adopting relative emission cut in per GDP unit instead of reduction in absolute or per capita amount.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

At the final stage of Copenhagen negotiation, there did appear some notable signs showing that China may moderate its policy position at the last minute. Unfortunately, these policy suggestions calling for undertaking some ‘concrete’ responsibility were not fully developed and then incorporated into the negotiation position of China at Copenhagen.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

Thus, China's policy position at Copenhagen can only be explained from a clearly-defined Chinese perspective within a specific international context. What underlies the intense dispute between China and the West is a special Chinese version of understanding to global environment and development:



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

Global climate change mitigation and adaptation is becoming another field of international competition, and there are probably no so-called ‘win-win’ results. For China, what at issue is not only ecological security of the globe, but also its historical development rights and long-term economic competitiveness in the globalizing world.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

As a result, together with other developing countries, China staunchly defended the conventional development rights and development discourse, showing its greatly increased strength as a world economic power, whereas neglecting its rapidly highlighting mission of leading the protection of ecological public or global ‘good’.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

First, is the *Copenhagen Accord* a good enough achievement? Shortly after the conference, Premier Jiabao Wen said, the *Copenhagen Accord* is a good agreement, in the sense that it is the result of arduous efforts made by many countries and it reconfirms the basic goals and principles in global climate governance.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

At the same time, he also acknowledged, this agreement is far from strong enough in terms of the necessity reversing the trend of global climate change. Among the academics and the public, however, a popular position is that the *Copenhagen Accord* only means more than nothing.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

Second, did China do something incorrect or fail to do something right at Copenhagen? According to an official speech of Premier Wen, Chinese delegation has expounded China's national policy of 'voluntary but determinate emission reduction' and made its greatest efforts to promote arriving at a global agreement. In this sense, China did nothing wrong at Copenhagen.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

From another speech of him at the news-conference after the 2010 session of National People's Congress (NPC), though, one may conjecture that China might make more compromises at the last moment if it had been treated more equally and politely.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

If looking at the opinions among the academics, what we can find is quite divergent. In general, except for Prof. Angang Hu, there are little comments saying that China should dramatically shift its position declared at Copenhagen, though a discernible convergence is that more ‘right doings’ on the global stage are both necessary and desirable.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

In this context, one can understand China's general situation or policy position towards global climate governance in the first years after Copenhagen:



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

Generally speaking, China promises to support the implementation of *Copenhagen Accord* and to adopt ever-stricter policy measurements to realize national targets of energy saving and emission reduction; while there is no consensus regarding whether and how China should assume any binding obligation of cutting emission in the targeted period of 2012-2020.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

The point at issue is not the exact year that China should peak its emission but when China will determine to join an international system based on the 'MRV' principles. And, it is in this regard which is problematic for both China and the West: The latter eagerly to realize such an integration but the former very reluctantly to do so.



# Heritage of the Copenhagen Conference for China

It seems that the majority of Chinese society needs a much longer time to digest the main message from Copenhagen: Given China's new identities – replacing US as the largest country of warm gases emission in the world, a rising economic and political power, and a rapidly industrializing developing country, saying 'to make our own backyard cleaner' is definitely no longer persuasive/good enough.



## **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

From a perspective of environmental politics, the Copenhagen heritage for China is in double senses: negative and positive--China knows that it can defend its conventional interests in a traditional approach, while China also knows that it has to figure out a new strategy dealing with the new politics (climate change).



# **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

Thus, for a short time, China is unlikely to dramatically reshape its current international strategy and profile to be an enthusiastic promoter for a stern system of global climate governance, e.g. for the period of 2012-2020. Over a long run, however, there is a great potential for China to re-orient its position in global climate governance.



# Moving towards a new stage of participation

Why? Domestically, Chinese governments are facing ever-stronger pressure to effectively resolve deteriorating environmental problems by strengthening the consistence of national and international policy. Otherwise, the local governments might continue to carry out a similar ‘dual strategy and tactic’ in implementing national environmental laws and regulations.



## **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

Internationally, confronting with a more divergent world in creating a global climate governance system, China increasingly realizes that a better way to protect its own interests is to maintain the on-going negotiation of a post-Kyoto plan as a UN-led regime rather than a West-dominated one.



## **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

Over the recent years, at the domestic level, Chinese governments started to adopt a more serious policy guideline against the even worsening environmental problems, such as fog and haze, though the discourse or strategy of eco-civilization construction is still far from fully committed or implemented.



## **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

At the international level, owing to the weakening pressure from the Western world caused by the economic and financial crises, Chinese government managed to avoid any substantial challenge at Cancun, Durban, Doha and Warsaw, no binding agreements to be reached or signed, on the one hand.



# **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

On the other hand, though insisting on extending the Kyoto Protocol into its second-stage and the major obligations for the advanced countries, China—as the leader of the BASIC group—generally supports establishing the Durban Platform, which will eventually lead to a post-2020 targeted global agreement in 2015. That implies a significant change of China’s policy position.



# **Moving towards a new stage of participation**

Thus, there is no surprise on 3 June 2014 to hear that, one day after Obama authority declaring that the US will introduce a stricter policy restricting the emission from coal power production—reducing 30% than 2005 by 2030, Chinese side also discloses that it is considering to set up a timetable for reducing its total amount of emission during the 13<sup>th</sup> national plan of 2016-2020.



# Moving towards a new stage of participation

In June 2015, China announced its offer for the coming Paris conference: peaking its total emission by 2030 and reducing its per GDP unit emission 60%-65% by 2030 comparing with 2005. Then, President Xi attended the 2015 global summit at New York and the Paris UN climate conference, showing that China will play a more active role in implementing the *Paris Accord*.



# Moving towards a new stage of participation

However, one should not be too optimistic to believe that China is making a U-turn on its policy of international negotiation and governance on climate change. Just like the ‘two track system’ of *Kyoto Accord*, the most interested element of new agreement for China is the ‘nationally determined contribution’. Thus there will still be some disputes about how to inspect its implementation.



## Conclusions

1) The recent adjustment of China's climate policy is both *situational* (short-term consideration based), not the least to liquidate the negative heritage from the unsuccessful Copenhagen conference, and *stage-making*, to find a positive way to be involved into creating an effective system of global climate governance.



## Conslusions

2) Given various reasons, like the three ones mentioned at the beginning: the total amount of its warm gas emission, the demonstration effects of the developed countries and the ever-enhancing national eco-awareness, China is unlikely to accept or assume a role of world-leader in this field in a foreseeable future. In other words, China will be more **active**, but not **unconditional**.



## Conslusions

3) The core elements of a China-favored global climate governance system will include: an up-dated version of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ principle; a UN-led real global rather than nationally-or regionally-dominated regime; a responsibility sharing/allocation mechanism fully considering/respecting the capacity difference among the nations as well as eco-regions, etc..



## Conslusions

4) The focus of China's global climate responsibility will be further shifted from the moral level to the political and legal level. However, to be politically and legally 'responsible', it is necessary and helpful for China to deepen/broaden its moral basis as an international player. Noteworthily, to fulfill the political and legal obligations is also some kind of moral responsibility.



## Conclusions

5) Undoubtedly, such a policy/ethical adjustment for China must be a ‘voluntary and autonomous’ choice/action. However, both the external ‘pull’ impetus and the internal ‘push’ impetus are necessary and desirable for a fundamental shift as such. Though, any input from international level should be reciprocal or mutually learning-inspired rather than single-dimensioned.



# Selected basic facts of China

- In 2012, the GDP per capita is 6000 US dollar, ranked as 87 in the world;
- In 2012, the total energy consumption is about 3620 Million s.t. coal, of them 67% is from coal and 9.1% is from renewable energy;
- In 2012, the total emission of CO<sub>2</sub> is 7954 Million t, while 7004 in 2010, 2849 in 2000, 2269 in 1990, 1448 in 1980.



# Selected basic facts of China

- 29 Feb. 2016, according to SSA of China, the amount of coal consumption in 2015 decreased by 3.7% compared with that in 2014, a quicker down-speed than 2.9% one year ago. (64% of the total energy)
- According to Green Peace, the total level of pollution in China peaked in 2011, and the figure of PM 2.5 was surpassed by India in 2015(北京:81, 新德里:128, W:12).

# About the speaker



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