China’s Environmental Issues, a Domestic Challenge with Regional and International Implications

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ABSTRACT

China and its population are confronted with fundamental environmental challenges, as both, environmental degeneration and the impact of climate change exhibit critical social, economic and political implications for their future development. Among the various environmental challenges China faces we can identify pollution issues, soil erosion, acid rain, and sea-level rise. This variety of environmental issues increases the underlying complexity of how best to address these challenges, especially as China’s growth strategy has the potential to exacerbate the negative impact on the environment. What’s more, China’s domestic environmental challenge also carries regional and global repercussions that could impact on its international relations. Consequently, how China’s government addresses its domestic environmental issues holds serious implications not only for the livelihood of its citizens, but for China’s regional and international relations as well.

Keywords: Chinese Politics, Climate Change, Environment, Global, International Relations, Regional

INTRODUCTION

China’s economic growth over the past twenty-five years is extraordinary with essentially positive consequences for the livelihood of millions of Chinese people. However, various social and economic challenges remain or emerged as a result of the reform/opening process, since the economic benefits are not equally distributed neither between urban and rural areas, nor within or between China’s provinces. As a result, several structural divisions developed over time, among them a rural-urban divide as well as an increasing gap of economic development within and between provinces. Further critical challenges emerged over time, among them environmental degeneration and serious pollutions issues, with climate change intensifying the pressure on China’s environment further. This negative environment impact has the potential to limit China’s future economic development as well as decreasing the quality of life for China’s population.

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Critically, the environmental question represents a complex issue with far-reaching implications, as a consequence of this complexity a range of different factors needs to be addressed. Among them, we can identify the character of specific environmental degeneration; its close link with development and the inherent social-political and economic-technical implications and challenges faced when addressing issues of environmental degeneration. Various environmental topics are also linked to national and international security issues, as for example energy security. In this context, identifying the historical and social origins of specific environmental challenges is of crucial importance for developing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced, highlighting that environmental challenges not only inherit an economic-technical dimension but a political-social dimension as well. Consequently, addressing specific environmental challenges will not only require economic-technical solutions but also to address the underlining social-political dimensions. Even as environmental degeneration and climate change represents major political, economic, and social issues they still do not command the serious response they require. Even so, changes in perception are already manifesting as both visibility and causality of environmental degeneration and climate change increase. Still, the visibility and the concreteness of a particular environmental issue are of critical relevance when it comes to the mobilization of a political response.

This paper will start with an assessment of China’s specific environmental challenges, before proceeding with an evaluation of the environment-development link. Thereafter, the paper will address the international and security dimensions of China’s environmental issues. Although one may argue, as the Chinese government is resisting signing international binding agreements with regards to emission reduction targets and climate change related topics, that the government is less concerned with the environmental and climate change issue. However, the immediate pressure in addressing China’s domestic environmental issue and its contribution to climate change has not decreased and it seems that the Chinese leadership is taking these challenges seriously.

CHINA’S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

It is beyond question that China and its population are confronted with a complex environmental challenge, characterized by a diverse range of issues. Among them acid rain and urban air pollution, both of representing critical concern closely related to China’s coal based energy generation. Land degeneration represents, in its various forms (deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, salinization), another pressing issue for China, especially rural soil pollution is a critical topic. Marine pollution represents yet another pressing environmental issue for China.

With regard to water resources China already faces fresh water scarcity. Industrial and household pollution further increase the pressure on fresh water resources. Highlighting the imbalance between supply and demand Chen Lei, Minister of Water Resources, point out that two-thirds of Chinese cities are confronted with a situation of an increasing water scarcity, adding that climate change could exacerbate this existing challenge further. However, the minister stated that sustainable water management and strict water resource management will help to tackle some of the shortage issues (Chang & Chao, 2011). Still, the pressure on the water resources will likely to increase further as China faces several drought conditions in various provinces over the last years. Actually, Hubei province faces an enduring drought, rendered one fourth of all small-sized reservoirs in the province unusable. As a result, the shortage of drinking water already affects the live of 3150,000 and 97,300 livestock. Even more, Hubei is not the only province to suffer from the drought as does Jiangxi, Hunan, Guangdong, Yunnan and Sichuan (Drought leaves nearly 1400 reservoirs dead in central China province, 2011). The middle section of the Chang Jiang also feel the enduring drought
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