

EU and China: Leadership after COP21

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Summary:

COP21 in Paris sparked a glimmer of hope that perhaps nations were finally ready to take on the climate crisis. The message of optimism now requires concrete action and steadfast commitment to a process that raises a number of crucial challenges: technological, political, social and economic. Who will lead after COP21? As the crisis continues to grow, new robust leadership is imperative. This paper discusses why a close collaboration between the EU and China may result in the necessary push to solidify a concrete vision and a roadmap for our common future in the Anthropocene.

Key Words:

Climate change, Anthropocene, China, EU

Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	4
II. The Development of the US-China Relationship	6
III. The EU-China Partnership	11
IV. Final Remarks.....	15
REFERENCES	18

EU and China: Leadership after COP21

I. Introduction

At the end of 2015, and following COP21 in Paris, the world saw the first glimmer of hope that perhaps the time has arrived for nations to effectively address and fight the climate crisis. The usual pessimism over political inaction that had characterized Climate Talks since Copenhagen in 2009, gave way to a degree of optimism. It appeared that the persistent message of climate deniers may have run its course, and that nations had found a way through the INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions) to offer their own plan to tackle the problem as part of the global effort to keep temperature increase below 2 C. This was undeniably a good message to come out of the conference, especially after the brutal terrorist attacks on the French capital just before the international gathering.

COP21 may not have produced an international legally binding treaty but it was a serious start. Unfortunately, however, no matter how good the message was and how well intentioned nations were in Paris, we must not forget that the fight to reign in the climate crisis is not a new problem, but has been under discussion for the longest time. Already, just a few months later, other issues find themselves on the top of the international agenda: recession, terrorism, and the refugee crisis to name a few.

Even in Davos, talks focused on China's economic slow-down and global economic prospects, the continued war and unrest in the wider Middle East and the refugee crisis, security challenges as a result of terrorist attacks, and the low prices of oil carried the day taking away the focus from climate change and its impacts on the economy.

The question now remains. Will this be a decentralized, do it yourself type of fight or will particular influential nations step-up to provide necessary leadership, above and beyond the efforts of the UN? Can there be a fast enough change in practices around the world without concrete leadership examples offering carrots and sticks to other nations to persevere in their work to decarbonize their economies and build more resilient and sustainable economies? If such leadership is needed which nations could best provide it?

Without a doubt, a fact proven once again in Paris, the European Union has risen to the challenge throwing its political and economic weight behind a push toward a low carbon future and for the achievement of a binding climate treaty almost from the outset. Europe has been the one consistent

beacon of hope throughout. It has led through example and formed partnerships at a global level. It has done this aspiring both to bring more countries into the fold of binding targets for carbon reduction and to create a more concrete plan to thwart the catastrophic process that the world has embarked on. With Europe's steadfast push, the negotiations managed to stay alive in Durban. COP 17, in fact, extended the life of Kyoto until 2020. Furthermore, the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action was launched, beginning a process that led to encouraging results during COP21 in Paris at the end of 2015.

The United States, moreover, under the presidency of Barack Obama has been making very vocal declarations sparking hope that perhaps the United States will now be at the forefront of climate action and meaningful international negotiations. This reversal has been greeted with relief following decades of denial and foot dragging which spilled over into the way the world has perceived the global prospects for dealing with climate change at the international level. It had seemed that the United States, one of the top contributors of carbon emissions, would never wholeheartedly get onboard nor would it lead global efforts to deal with the crisis. Today, there is a different air blowing in Washington. In his announcements, President Obama's tone has increasingly gotten stronger urging leaders to "act boldly on climate change... or condemn our children to a world they will no longer have the capacity to repair."²

China too, from the 10th Five Year Plan onwards and with growing emphasis, began including ambitious policies and targets for the protection of the environment. It called for the adoption of energy efficiency measures and the reduction of energy intensive industrial production, while seeking to consolidate its energy industry. It has begun investing heavily in the production of renewables for its domestic market and for export; it embarked on the creation of a carbon-trading scheme; and, most recently, announced ambitious measures to combat air pollution rates in the capital and other major cities across the country. For China, the pressure to deliver a cleaner, healthier environment to its citizens, has reached critical level and concrete action is imperative as public pressure continues to intensify.

Three different actors, three superpowers that dominate the world economy and global affairs all now appear ready to provide the necessary momentum forward. How realistic are the prospects for their cooperation and steadfast leadership on this most pressing global issue? At first glance, it appears that perhaps this issue has already been settled after the joint announcement on November 12, 2014 by Presidents Obama and Xi that gave climate action new headlines and new momentum³.

² Halimah Abdullah and M. Alex Johnson, 'Obama on Climate Change: Act Now or Condemn World to a Nightmare,' *NBC News*, September 1, 2015, viewed on September 20, 2015, < <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/obama-climate-change-act-now-or-condemn-world-nightmare-n419071> >

³ 'U.S.-China Joint Announcement On Climate Change', *The White House, Office of The Press Secretary*, Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, Viewed June 1, 2015, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/Us-China-Joint-Announcement-Climate-Change> >

The carefully worded announcement underscored the necessity foremost for bilateral cooperation and outlined their mutual preference for an agreement that reflected 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' determined by the national circumstances of each party.

President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping reaffirmed the importance of strengthening bilateral cooperation on climate change and will work together, and with other countries, to adopt a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties at the United Nations Climate Conference in Paris in 2015. They are committed to reaching an ambitious 2015 agreement that reflects the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstances.⁴

Do these recent developments, however, assure us that it will now be the United States and China together that will take the baton and lead the world into an enduring, comprehensive, and timely action plan to curb the worsening of the climate crisis?

II. The Development of the US-China Relationship

While the US government is projecting renewed vigor in dealing with the climate crisis, the political realities in the United States have not sufficiently changed, nor is the American INDC⁵ plan submitted bold enough, warning us not to become overly optimistic by official declarations. Furthermore, though the US-China relationship carries significant weight and impacts world affairs, it is also plagued with an underlying rivalry for economic, political, and military pre-eminence. American analyses underline China's rapid and 'dangerous' rise abound in scholarly, political, and security circles. The undeclared battle over technology and economic strength rages on as does the critique of China's one party political system, human rights record, and level of openness. This combination of values and distrust characterizing the nature of the relationship between the two superpowers has been made clear by the US strategic pivot toward Asia and China's recent initiatives to build a new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)⁶ - seen as a rival to the World Bank, the IMF and the Asian Development Bank -

⁴ U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, viewed June 1, 2015, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change> >

⁵ 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions', *United Nations Framework on Climate Change*, viewed on November 10, 2015, <<http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/United%20States%20of%20America/1/U.S.%20Cover%20Note%20INDC%20and%20Accompanying%20Information.pdf> >

⁶ The AIIB initiative was launched by President Xi in late 2013.

and to reimagine and rebuild the Silk Road,⁷ offering a Chinese notion of a 'Chinese dream' in Central Asia and beyond.⁸

Perhaps the international community may learn more about the prospects of such a leadership model by reading a bit between the lines. The announcement of a US-China initiative for climate action may have grabbed the spotlight, but underlying questions remain: Why, in dealing with a global problem that requires unprecedented international political and economic cooperation, did the two actors hold center stage barely acknowledging the efforts of other nations and particularly the European Union that has a proven record in dealing with the climate? Was it politically expedient to use the climate as a podium from which to announce to the world the birth of a new bipolar era where the United States and China now reign supreme? Did the two powers simply capture the world's attention for a moment, but miss the opportunity to acknowledge not only the climate crisis in and of itself but the earth's entrance into the Anthropocene? How limited was their expressed understanding of the actual challenges of the Anthropocene when their words reduced their vision to a laundry list of items that need to be checked off in order to deal with the growing threat of climate change and other environmental challenges?⁹

There is, of course, no doubt that both the United States and China are necessary if an enduring plan to deal with the climate crisis is to be agreed on. They are amongst the largest economies that emit the vast majority of carbon emissions and represent formidable players in the global arena. Specifically, the two big giant economies together accounted for 44% of global total CO₂ emissions as of 2013¹⁰.

The question is not whether they should be onboard. It is whether they can together propose and implement at home, and advocate abroad, an entirely new set of policies to deal with the complexities of the *Anthropocene*. These complexities go beyond the climate to include our food systems, our resource use, patterns of overproduction and overconsumption, unsustainable agricultural practices, and environmental degradation, to name but a few. Would they be willing to go about reinventing themselves from principal actors that are changing the global environment to becoming our planet's stewards?

⁷ Cary Huang, "57 nations approved as founder members of China-led AIIB", *South China Morning Post*, 27 April 2015, viewed on May 1, 2015, <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1766970/57-nations-approved-founder-members-china-led-aiib> >

"UK support for China-backed Asia bank prompts US concern," *BBC News*, 13 March 2015, viewed May 1, 2015, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-31864877> >

⁸ Neil Thompson, 'China's Growing Presence in Russia's Backyard', *The Diplomat*, March 25, 2015, viewed May 3, 2015, <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/chinas-growing-presence-in-russias-backyard/> >

⁹ "U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change," *The White House*, Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, viewed on June 1, 2015, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change> >

¹⁰ See Global Carbon Atlas, data for 2013, viewed June 1, 2015, <<http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/>>

We are at a crossroads, and climate change is a prominent sign of human driven change. Those who will lead us should first and foremost understand the choice we will inevitably have to make. As time goes by and we complete our transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, we risk driving the Earth System onto a trajectory that will not be as friendly and accommodating as that of the previous era that supported the growth and development of human civilization.¹¹ Furthermore, by focusing the discourse primarily on the climate, we tend to overlook the impact of the relentless erosion of ecosystem services. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, "out of 24 ecosystems services, from direct services such as food provision to more indirect services such as ecological control of pests and diseases, 15 are being degraded or used unsustainably."¹² Humanity is now living off the Earth's natural capital and beyond the productivity of its ecosystems.

Thus far, declarations aside, the record shows that the United States is not a nation that has aspired to set binding goals and targets to, at the very least, reduce carbon emissions across its own territory. It is averse to signing an internationally binding treaty because it views it as constraining its ability to act according to its perceived interests. The US has been exceptionally divided politically on the issue of climate action, showcasing some of the world's loudest climate deniers. It maintains an unrelenting belief in the importance of providing inexpensive energy to its citizens and its industries, and offers unwavering support for industrial agriculture. Even in times of acute crisis, US governments continue to urge their citizens to consume, to spend, in order to drive the economy forward. The last golden era of environmental legislation and agenda setting appears to have been in the 1970s¹³ with very little groundbreaking action ever since.

That is not to say, however, that local and state governments have not taken up the fight against climate change and other environmental issues. In fact, many are working to build resiliency, introduce emission standards and encourage renewables in their energy mix.¹⁴ Once considered bankrupted and problematic, local and state governments have taken up more and more responsibilities and are now viewed as the hope and the leading agents for change in the United States,¹⁵ with the federal government shirking much of its leadership and its responsibilities due to the breakdown of government in Washington DC.

Consumers in the United States are turning toward more local, organic foods, demanding standards and supporting local markets and small farms. Large cities have designed greening plans and many

¹¹ Will Steffen et al., *The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship*, *AMBIO* (2011) 40:739–761.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Norman J. Vig & Michael E. Kraft, *Environmental Policy: New Directions for the 21st century*, Sage/CQ Press, Washington, DC, 2013.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

institutions have competed amongst themselves to lower their energy emissions and carbon footprint.¹⁶ In an ironic twist, it is perhaps the US military that has have been the most vocal advocate for the use of renewables and for the further development of green technologies, having found them useful on the battlefield. The Department of Defense (DoD) has announced an ambitious program of expanded renewable energy generation on bases and in the field, with a goal of producing 25% of its energy from renewable sources by 2025.¹⁷

For an administration that has tried to set an ambitious environmental agenda in the second term, Obama's record is fairly mixed. He has consistently pushed forth changes in some areas, while giving new concessions to the oil and gas industries, opening up untouched federal water for drilling¹⁸ even in a time when fossil fuels are the cheapest they have been for over a decade. Neither climate action nor a holistic narrative to address the changing and complex issues arising in the *Anthropocene* have yet been crafted or adopted by the US government. The US agenda of priorities has largely remained the same, revolving around security issues, economic dominance, free trade and political entanglements around the globe.

In China, from the 1970s onwards, the first and foremost concern has been maintaining economic growth to bring millions of people a year into the middle class. Achieving this is what sustains the communist party's legitimacy in the eyes of its people especially after the earlier economic debacles of Mao's era that left the country demoralized, hungry and poor.¹⁹ To achieve these aims the PRC consistently uses its power position and financial liquidity to secure resources, building strong relationships with countries throughout the developing world, many of which had been forgotten post Cold War by the United States.²⁰

¹⁶ C40 cities, viewed on June 1, 2015, <<http://www.c40.org>>, Green NYC, viewed on June 1, 2015, <<http://www.nyc.gov/html/greenyc/html/home/home.shtml>>

¹⁷ Renewable Energy for Military Installations: 2014 Industry Review, American Council on Renewable Energy (ACORE), February 2014, viewed on May 15, 2015,

<<http://www.acore.org/files/pdfs/Renewable-Energy-for-Military-Installations.pdf>>

¹⁸ Coral Daveport, 'U.S. Will Allow Drilling for Oil in Arctic Ocean', *The New York Times*, May 11, 2015, viewed June 1, 2015, < <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/us/white-house-gives-conditional-approval-for-shell-to-drill-in-arctic.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news> >

¹⁹ Paul S. Ropp, *China in World History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

²⁰ Asteris Huliaras and Konstantinos Magliveras, *In Search of a Policy: EU and US Reactions to a Growing Chinese Presence in Africa*, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 13:399-420, 2008; Xu Yi-Chong, 'China and the United States in Africa: Coming conflict or commercial coexistence?' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 62, No. 1, pp. 16-37, March 2008.

While these priorities have not changed, the government is, however, simultaneously pushing the green agenda²¹ because the years of unbridled economic growth without strong environmental regulations have made pollution in many areas of China unbearable for citizens. Smog, water pollution and a dramatic degradation of the environment is overwhelming and reaching critical levels, spreading discontent and unrest among the Chinese. This is an outcome that the Chinese leadership would like to avoid at all costs and is thus currently addressing the problem more actively. China, furthermore, lacks the energy resources that the United States has, though its energy needs are constantly growing, necessitating a diversification of its energy mix to maintain energy security and abundance.²² The opportunity to create new jobs, through innovation and the production of new green applications and technologies supports policy change required for a transition to a less energy intensive model of growth and production. Yet it is predominantly the environmental degradation experienced across the country that is driving the vision and the framing of China's growing priority to green its economy.

Finally, because of its one party, centralized governing system, China can more rapidly implement changes once its political will has been focused. In terms of the effectiveness of its policies in Chinese regions, it is working to ensure that directives are now implemented instead of remaining on paper alone, seeking to break the resistance and to entice regional governments to accept and support changes in the growth model. On the international level, China has chosen to show leadership through its strong preference for multilateral cooperation and is uniquely poised to reach out to developing nations speaking as one of them, while also achieving super power status.²³

Undoubtedly, the world needs strong and committed leadership and perhaps – as countries are discovering- it is difficult to have a one-size fits all blueprint to climate action, but commitment, transparency and standards are a must in order to move forward. A number of scholars and policy makers today speak about taking a 'club' approach in dealing with the climate crisis, describing it as a more flexible model for such challenges. A smaller and more exclusive group of collaborators – especially of the largest emitters that matter the most at this junction – would facilitate the generation of more complex deals and better coordination for the distribution of benefits through cooperation.²⁴ It will not, however, be enough for them to focus only on the climate per se and the negotiation of some form of international treaty, but to also draw connections to other large concerns raised in the Anthropocene.

²¹ Jun Li, Xin Wang, 'Energy and climate policy in China's twelfth five-year plan: A paradigm shift,' *Energy Policy*, vol. 42, 2012, pp. 519-528.

²² Joseph Y. S. Cheng, 'A Chinese View of China's Energy Security', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 55, 2008, pp. 207-227; Christian Constantin, 'Understanding China's energy security', *World Political Science Review*, no. 3, 2007; Suisheng Zhao, 'China's Global Search for Energy Security: cooperation and competition in Asia-Pacific,' *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 55, 2008, pp. 207-227.

²³ Joshua Eisenman, Eric Heginbotham, and Derek Mitchell, *China and the Developing World: Beijing's Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 2007.

²⁴ David G. Victor, *Global Warming Gridlock*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

III. The EU-China Partnership

While a joint US-China leadership model may have too many pitfalls to navigate through, even if the 'club' approach were to be adopted, there is another potential power partnership that may be more suitable for the kind of action necessary to address the climate crisis and develop a new path for operating in the Anthropocene; one between the EU and China. A dynamic EU-China partnership can represent a more effective paradigm shift as well as a demonstration of global leadership.

Europe's involvement with climate change policy has been systematic and has evolved over four distinct periods: the formation and formulation phase from the late 1980s to 1992, the Kyoto protocol negotiation phase from 1992-2001, the Kyoto protocol rescue phase (2001-2005) after President Bush announced he would not be ratifying the protocol, and the current period of implementation, Kyoto protocol follow-up and push to reach a new international binding agreement.²⁵

Certainly, the European Union has defended its commitment to a legally binding and rules-based approach to international action on climate change while implementing an ambitious action-plan to diversify its energy mix, promote emission reductions and resource efficiency in its own territory. It has used regulations, taxation, outreach programs, standards, policies, laws, directives, media and politics to create a narrative of economic opportunity while continuing to protect the ecosystem. In fact, it is clear that in the time after Kyoto, the EU has starkly differentiated itself from the United States in policy ambitions, stringency and scope, and has legislated broadly vis-à-vis climate change.

Already in March 2007, the European Council embarked on a binding plan to reduce green house gas emissions. Known as the 20-20-20 targets²⁶, the plan mandated a 20% reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions below 1990 levels by 2020. It also set a target of a 20-percent increase in the share of renewable energies in overall energy consumption, including a 10-percent binding minimum target for transport fuels and a 20-percent cut in primary energy consumption compared to projected levels through energy-efficiency improvements. These goals were backed by legislation across the Union. The EU also launched and supported the EU-ETS emissions trading system; it adopted regulations on emission performance for new cars; it encouraged and facilitated new technologies in Renewables.²⁷

Nothing similar happened in the United States over that same period. In fact, President Obama had to resort to his executive powers to effect change through the Clean Air Act for stricter emission standards for transport and stationary emission sources. Even today, Europe forges ahead, having now mapped

²⁵ Rudiger K.W. Wurzel & James Connelly, *The European Union as a Leader in International Climate Change Politics*, Routledge, New York, 2011.

²⁶ Communication from the EU Commission, EUROPE 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth Brussels, 3.3.2010 COM(2010)2020 final, viewed on May 2, 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/targets/eu-targets/index_en.htm >

²⁷ Jon Birger Skjærseth, Guri Bang, and Miranda A. Schreurs 'Explaining Growing Climate Policy Differences Between the European Union and the United States,' *Global Environmental Politics* 13:4, November 2013.

out its even more ambitious 2030 goals²⁸ for the Union as a whole, while countries like Germany are aiming for a broader energy transformation known as *Energiewende*.²⁹ Clearly, Europe is demonstrating that its commitment to climate action is backed by a larger philosophy of development and life in the *Anthropocene*.

If the EU and China would pool their resources, coordinate their efforts and demonstrate joint leadership to combat the climate crisis, gradually drawing in other countries, might this not only provide sufficient impetus towards a lasting and deep international collaboration and the beginning of an alternative narrative to economic growth and development? This is a complex question with many ramifications that suggests an alternative paradigm based on the building of new power alliances. Its impact, however, would be such that it requires further exploration of the political, economic and societal forces at play in order to understand such a potentially fundamental international development.

Dealing effectively with the climate crisis is now more imperative than ever before and more drastic efforts are required by all parties if we are to even begin to make a dent in this global challenge. Nonetheless, it is not the only kind of action the world needs. It is the offering of another path to the future, one that has sustainability imbedded in the drafting of laws, policies and economic exchanges. Understanding the particular nature of the new epoch the planet has entered will perhaps persuade countries to forego making the mistakes of past and current development models that only continue to aggravate disparities worldwide.

There are a number of reasons why an EU-China climate leadership could be effective. As mentioned above, the EU, in describing its own foreign policy objectives, supports a multipolar world, the importance of cooperation through international institutions, and adherence to the rule of law. China, as an emerging power, shares Europe's views on multipolarity and working through international institutions to help maintain stability and cooperation worldwide. Until now, China has maintained a stance of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and has strategically avoided antagonizing other industrial powers to focus on its domestic development. Nonetheless, it has already begun to re-assert itself in Asia and abroad through strong development aid programs in Africa and elsewhere much like the EU that is in fact the largest donor of development aid in the world.

According to those closely monitoring China politics, President Xi Jinping is personally invested in matters of 'foreign policy'. He has not only travelled extensively, but also has received many foreign visitors in his

²⁸ European Commission, GREEN PAPER, *A 2030 framework for climate and energy policies*, Brussels, 27.3.2013, COM(2013) 169 final.

²⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, 'Germany, the Green Superpower,' *The New York Times*, May 6, 2015, viewed on June 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-germany-the-green-superpower.html?action=click&contentCollection=Books&module=MostEmailed&version=Full®ion=Marginalia&src=me&pgtype=article&_r=0>

own country as well.³⁰ Yet, President Xi Jinping has also to come to terms with pressing domestic realities. China today is already the world's second largest economy and the largest consumer of oil on the planet. In just under 50 years, China has radically transformed itself into a global economic powerhouse. This transformation begun by Deng Xiaoping has come at an astonishing cost to the environment and the wellbeing of its citizens, a fact that can no longer be ignored. Rhetorically, the Chinese government acknowledged the problem about three decades ago, establishing the State Environmental Protection Committee in 1984, and the first Environmental Protection Law that was formally issued in 1989. After the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, China was one of the first countries to formulate and carry out a strategy of sustainable development. Since the 10th five-year plan (2001-2005) the government increased its emphasis and goals vis-à-vis environmental protection and energy use in its planning process. Yet, little changed. A decade ago, the government once again pledged to tackle the air pollution, access to clean water and food safety. Today, pressure to deliver on these commitments is mounting and rhetoric must turn to action.³¹

This will be one of the greatest challenges for President Xi Jinping because bringing millions of people to the middle class each year through high growth figures will not be enough to maintain political legitimacy. The health risk to citizens by the heavy smog, unsafe water, and problems in the food supply are only growing and so is the realization and discontent that this kind of environmental degradation has gone far enough and must now be reversed. What is happening today is that the state of China's environment is beginning to poison the country's economy, and this will adversely impact investment that is still playing a central role in the nation's growth.³²

There are a number of areas where the government is seeking to make an immediate impact. First, environmental regulations already existing in the books need to be tightened and enforced. Monitoring enforcement in the regions has been a challenge for the central government. Secondly, there is an ongoing 'rethink' taking place about where industries should be located. Up until now, the coastal areas of China have been rapidly transformed and industrialized, but there is now a plan to shift some of this industrial capability to the inland. Third, urbanization continues at very high rates. While this puts pressure on cities, their infrastructure, and the quality of life, urbanization does pose an opportunity to create more sustainable models of city planning aiming at the creation of smart cities, green cities where changes can be made on the existing infrastructure. This not only would allow for close cooperation with the European Union whose expertise is unrivaled in these areas, but also for the implementation of new green technologies and sustainable practices, taking advantage of China's centralized planning structure. Greening its urban environment is a unique opportunity for the PRC to

³⁰ Tim Summers, Chinese Foreign Policy: What to Expect in 2015 Chatman House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 13 January 2015, viewed on August 2, 2015, <<http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/16637#sthash.LXu81ODI.dpf> >

³¹ Qi Ye, 'China's Commitment to A Green Agenda', *Mckinsey Quarterly*, June 2013, viewed on May 4, 2015, <[HTTP://WWW.Mckinsey.com/Insights/Asia-Pacific/Chinas_Commitment_To_A_Green_Agenda](http://www.mckinsey.com/Insights/Asia-Pacific/Chinas_Commitment_To_A_Green_Agenda) >

³² Mun S. Ho, Chris P. Nielsen, *Clearing the Air: The Health and Economic Damages of Air Pollution in China*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007; Zhang, Dongyong; Liu, Junjuan & Li, Bingjun 2014 'Tackling Air Pollution in China—What do We Learn from the Great Smog of 1950s in LONDON' *Sustainability* 6/8: p5322–5338.

invest and integrate energy saving and pollution reduction policies to help ameliorate living conditions throughout Chinese cities.

In terms of governance, the members of the European Union may be mature democracies and free market economies but the Union does provide its European partners with a level of central planning that allows for coordination of its 28 states.³³ China's unique model of centralized planning and one-party governance is coupled with a continually liberalizing economy. In addition to these commonalities, both Europe and China share long historical exchanges that go back to the time of the creation of the Silk Road.

Clearly, the EU and China represent formidable international actors with a combined population of over 1.8 billion, increasing economic interdependence and shared interests. Xi Jinping's recent trip to Europe (spring 2014) and his historic visit to EU headquarters underscores both a strengthening relationship and the desire to build upon and expand ties beyond trade agreements. There is already an ongoing dialogue in place vis-à-vis the climate crisis with the EU sharing its best practices and strategies with its Chinese counterparts, thus providing the platform for further collaboration on this front. The ground is already set for the promotion of an ambitious agenda to fight climate change.³⁴ Specifically the European Union and China formed a Strategic Partnership in 2003 that has built on the initial 1985 EU China trade and cooperation agreement. This new strategic partnership has evolved to include matters of foreign affairs, security and international challenges not only on global economic governance but also importantly on climate change.

The EU and China have both put forward strategic development plans - China's two centenary goals and the 12th Five Year Plan, the EU 2020 Strategy - which present potential for synergies to enhance cooperation for win-win results. The two sides are committed to promoting the EU-China Comprehensive strategic Partnership in the next decade.³⁵

The EU and the PRC have introduced three pillars of high level exchanges: the High-Level Strategic Dialogue (2010), the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (2008) and the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (2012).³⁶

The two powers underscore collaboration opportunities in the document describing the nature of their 2020 Agenda for Strategic Cooperation, thus highlighting the emerging green sectors that not only create business opportunities for both, but are an essential component of achieving what they define as "the common task of achieving innovative, inclusive and sustainable development."³⁷ The EU has also undertaken to facilitate the building of China's emission trading market and to work together at a

³³ Neill Nugent, *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2010.

³⁴ 'EU Relations with China: EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation', European Union External Action, viewed on June 1, 2015, <http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/20131123_agenda_2020__en.pdf >

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Jing Men, 'Is There A Strategic Partnership between the EU and China?' (2014) 19 *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Issue 3/1, pp. 5-17.

³⁷ 'EU Relations with China: EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation', *idem*.

practical level for the building of both EU and China low-carbon cities, communities and industrial parks thus controlling greenhouse gas emissions. Together the two actors seek to develop low carbon technologies and promote the use of renewable energy to reduce the consumption of fossil fuel and thereby their emissions.³⁸

Although, the building blocks for such a partnership are already there, much needs to be done for both entities to fully absorb the potential of such collaboration. As China asserts itself on the world stage, expanding ties across the globe, it still remains caught up in affairs of its own neighborhood and in the narrative of simmering rivalry with the United States, especially after the latter's declared strategic pivot toward Asia. For the PRC, US rivalry does not only pose a security threat in military terms or an aggressive economic competitor. It also poses a deeper political threat to the regime, offering the lure of the democratic process to an increasingly robust middle class clearly on the rise in the PRC.

These realities could be an additional reason for China to meaningfully deepen its relationship with the European Union, which expresses its views and projects its power in a very different manner than that of the United States, which often seems more heavy handed and aggressive in exporting liberal democratic values and principles. Working closely with Europe on the climate crisis may be just what China needs to escape the push and pull of the self-fulfilling prophesy of its inevitable clash with the United States. It will also allow it the opportunity to retrace its steps and find how to more efficiently and sustainably provide for its citizens, without plundering the planet's resources.

IV. Final Remarks

Forging a bolder and deeper EU-China alliance requires rethinking on both sides. While China views the EU as a powerhouse of technology and innovation as well as a critical trading partner, it does not perceive it as a geostrategic competitor. Especially after – pressured by the United States - the EU decided against lifting the arms embargo against China in 2004 and 2005, the PRC no longer seems to hold an expectation of the EU rivaling the US as a leader in the international arena. Its perceptions of the EU are often crafted by how it believes the EU views China. The ongoing EU debt crisis in the eyes of policy makers in China serves as an indicator of EU political weakness and perhaps decline and while it was once thought of as the alternative to US dominance now this belief has lost its momentum.³⁹ It is this particular issue that has become a focus of EU-China related analyses with widespread European expectation of China coming to its rescue combined with a simultaneous reluctance to encourage and promote Chinese foreign direct investment on the Continent.

While China sees the European Union and individual member states as one and the same, Chinese officials rarely visit Europe without stop-overs in a number of member-states, bypassing Brussels more

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Brown Kerry, *The EU–China Relationship: European Perspectives: A Manual for Policy Makers*, Imperial College Press, Kindle Edition, 2014.

often than not. It is not without significance that the PRC fosters relations with particular nations given that larger member-states are unwilling to give up their individual seats in international institutions for one EU place at the table. Europe's hesitation or inability to create a stronger political Union doesn't allow it to be seen as a unitary global player with a clear voice in international relations. Apart from these constraints, opportunities remain plentiful and the possibilities of further exploring this burgeoning relationship still abound. There is, furthermore, a growing interest in academic and policy circles for new research to understand EU-China diplomacy, both traditional and soft, and the assessment of the effectiveness of the current strategic partnership.⁴⁰

Many reasons can be evoked to shift attention from such an important new possibility of global leadership. Clearly, there is an ongoing academic and policy debate about China's evolving role in the international community and whether it is ready and interested in engaging more fully in areas other than the economic sphere.⁴¹ But the responsibility is not China's alone. Europe too is under scrutiny and is being questioned about whether it has the ongoing focus and the resolve required for such a fundamental joint leadership role, given its ongoing debt crisis.

A response to the climate crisis primarily necessitates political willpower. The leadership that EU and Chinese collaboration could provide may result in the necessary push to solidify a concrete vision and a roadmap for the future, allowing other developing countries to enter the fold and also, perhaps, solidifying US commitment to the process.

The industrial revolution may have marked the beginning of a measurable global impact on our planet, but nothing can compare to the *Great Acceleration* that began after the Second World War, which resulted in dramatic population expansion, rapid globalization, mass production, technological and communications revolutions, improved farming methods and medical advances.⁴² It can be said that humanity is today actively 'remodeling the physical and biological world,'⁴³ and impacting the existence of every species including ours in a way that makes us now the change-makers. Geologists have started to call this new era the Anthropocene, in recognition that we have now been transformed into a geophysical force that is defining the next era. This is why though a myriad of factors make outcomes hard to predict, in the words of Connie Hedegaard, former EU Commissioner for Climate Action, referring to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2014, "The

⁴⁰ Jing Men, 'EU-China Relations and Diplomacy: Introductory Note' (2014) 19 *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Issue 3/1, pp. 1–3.

⁴¹ Peter Nolan, *Is China Buying the World?*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2013.

Deng Yong, China: The Post-Responsible Power, *The Washington Quarterly*, 37:4, pp. 117–132; Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, 'Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust,' John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, Number 4, March 2012; David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013.

⁴² Gaia Vince, *Adventures in the Anthropocene: A Journey to the Heart of the Planet We Made*, Milkweed Editions, Kindle Edition, 2014.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

report is clear: there really is no plan B for climate change. There is only plan A: collective action to reduce emissions now."⁴⁴

Hedegaard saw the potential of a close Alliance between the EU and China and appreciated the important work now being done in the PRC for the first time since her early pronouncements. During her April 2014 visit there, Hedegaard emphasized how impressed she was by the action the PRC was taking to cut emissions saying, "I would hope that this domestic strong focus can be translated into a strong position internationally, because that would be a game changer in the international talks."⁴⁵ Though there are no guarantees of success, there is the hope sparked by COP 21 in Paris showing the path for both great powers to take a closer look at what could prove to be the start of a new era of vision and leadership in the Anthropocene.

⁴⁴ European Commission, Climate Action, 'IPCC report highlights need for collective and significant action to keep warming below 2°C', 14 April 2014, viewed on July 1, 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/clima/news/articles/news_2014041401_en.htm>

⁴⁵ Stian Rekev, 'EU climate chief urges China to show international commitment,' *REUTERS.com*, Apr 23, 2014, viewed on May 1, 2015, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/23/us-china-eu-climatechange-idUSBREA3M0F320140423>>

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