

The Problem of China: As viewed from the USA

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, SEP 20 2009

For more than a century, the overwhelming majority of greenhouse gases have been emitted by advanced industrial states. Recently, however, China has assumed the top spot in annual emissions. On a per person basis, of course, China still trails the global leaders by a good distance.

Those statistics highlight the related problems of scale (China is really big) and inequality (much of China remains very poor), which have challenged international negotiators for more than a decade.

To fulfill its economic development plans, China is in the midst of building hundreds of new coal-fired electrical plants and is alone responsible for about half of all new construction in this sector. Fast-growing India is also planning to build more than 200 new coal-fired electrical plants. Environmentalists are worried that completion of these new plants would swamp any short-term emissions reductions attributable to the Kyoto accords.

What will happen in the coming decades? Unfortunately, the future looks even worse.

According to a recent study completed by a coalition of environmental organizations and the Chinese government, the future will be fairly bleak:

The two-year study, supported by the U.S.-based Energy Foundation and the international environmental group WWF, also said if China's energy usage structure remains unchanged, its emissions of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming would reach 17 billion tons a year by 2050. That would represent 60 percent of total global emissions and three times China's current production, it said.

"If the current mode of economic development drags on, the scale of China's fossil fuel consumption will be shocking," said the study, titled "China's Low Carbon Development Pathways by 2050."

The study provides the details, but given the well-known developments of the recent past, I'm not sure even Major Renault would be "shocked" by these findings:

Using energy consumption growth trends from 2002 to 2008, the study said China's energy usage could exceed 100 billion tons of standard coal in 2050, more than the Earth's capacity to sustain and far more than the 16.1 billion tons of standard coal the entire planet consumed in 2008.

This summer, the new U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu pointed out that China is poised to emit more greenhouse gases in the next thirty years than the U.S. has in its entire history. Even though the new U.S. political administration seems more willing to consider global solutions to climate change, it is nonetheless still going to try to pursue a deal that will preserve American interests. Obviously, in addition to climate issues, the U.S. is also interested in China's economic growth and the future economic competitiveness of both states.

These facts lead to the obvious question: Will one of the major barriers to U.S. entry into Kyoto continue to block progress on Copenhagen? According to the latest news reports, it seems quite possible.

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“After you,” each major power seems to be saying to the other.

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