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Climate change: the China Challenge

Editorial

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Editorial

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HUCHET

With an annual GDP growth rate well above the 7% to 8% forecast by the Government at the start of the decade, and in spite of significant attempts over recent years to conserve energy, China is being hurled faster than was foreseen into the global problems associated with climate change. It is estimated that by 2007, China will have overtaken the United States in absolute terms as the world's largest producer of carbon dioxide. Unlike other environmental problems related to water, air or soil pollution, greenhouse gas emissions from a small number of countries are capable of causing irreversible damage to the whole planet. Historically it has been the most industrialised countries, led by the United States and followed by the European Union and Japan, which have been mainly responsible for global warming due to human activity, while between 1950 and 2002 China only accounted for 9.3% of total global emissions. Currently, however, that situation is being rapidly reversed. The International Energy Agency (IEA) has calculated that by 2030, China's production of greenhouse gases could be double the amount emitted by the United States⁽¹⁾. Consequently, China, together with other large developing countries like India, Brazil or Russia, now finds itself facing an ethical, economic and diplomatic dilemma: how can it secure a legitimate economic development without undermining the international attempts currently incorporated into the Kyoto Protocol to resolve the problem of climate warming?

The dossier presented here is organised around the different aspects of this complex dilemma. The first article, by Jean-Paul Maréchal and Jean-François Huchet, presents a general overview, analysing the ethical and economic aspects, as well as tracing the diplomatic path followed by China in the international climate negotiations, which is constrained by the high probability of its continuing rapid economic growth in the coming decade.

The article in which Alexandra Tracy, Kate Trumbull and Christine Loh look at the Pearl River Delta, demonstrates that, unless there is a swift and coordinated response by the authorities, there could

be very serious repercussions from global warming in this industrial region, which is the largest in China and which, we need to remember, represents 10% of its GDP and 30% of its exports. The article by Nathalie Rousset focuses on the impact of climate warming on agriculture through an analysis of its potential repercussions in northern China. She shows that it could have a serious effect on water supplies and agricultural production in a region which is home to 42% of the total population and comprises 60% of the country's arable land. These two articles remind us that, while China will not be solely responsible for global warming, it will be as much a victim of it as other countries. Paradoxically, this offers some hope to the rest of the world. The Chinese government will be afraid of the country's growth rates slowing down, and therefore will have to take urgent steps towards implementing more environmentally friendly policies, and these in turn will affect the level of greenhouse gas emissions.

Among all these policies, the ones dealing specifically with coal production and building towns with less greenhouse gas emissions, seem to us to be decisive in answering the question as to whether China can become a credible and responsible participant in international climate negotiations. Jean-Marie Martin-Amouroux's article on the coal issue reminds us that there is a very difficult balance to be struck. Up until 2030, China will continue to be largely dependent on coal for its enormous energy requirements. In order to reach their goals in carbon dioxide reduction while mass-producing coal, the authorities will have to promote the rapid introduction of technological solutions of which the economic viability and widespread acceptance by the producers are far from certain. In his article, Julien Allaire examines the relevant policies in housing and transport. The prospects look better in the latter field, even if major problems remain, particularly in achieving wide use of bio-fuel engines in the Chinese car industry at a time when the country is set

1. *World Energy Outlook 2006*, International Energy Agency, Paris, 2006, 599 pp.

to possess one of the largest stocks of vehicles on the planet between now and 2030.

The next three articles examine how China is going to participate in the international talks on global warming, and most probably disrupt them. Béatrice Quenault draws our attention to the non-binding framework that the developing countries have built into the Kyoto Protocol ⁽²⁾. She also analyses how the structure of the post-2012 agreement will have to find a place for China and India, and accommodate their legitimate desire for development while limiting their greenhouse gas emissions. Michal Meidan's article addresses Chinese diplomacy, showing how domestic factors have had a great influence on China's refusal to have greenhouse gas emission quotas imposed on it by international agreements. Yet he also indicates that China's position is far from being set in stone. The Chinese government might shift its position in response to various, sometimes contradictory, pressures. Admittedly these are likely to be more national than international, even though China knows that, along with the United States, it has become a major player in the post-Kyoto negotiations, and that it will have to make some concessions. Philippe Delhaise, who is a director of one of the main firms specialising in

launching projects within the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) set up under the Kyoto Protocol, describes the progress and the limitations of the CDM and examines how China, within a few years, has become the leading recipient of funds transferred from the industrialised countries through the CDM.

Finally, the contribution from He Gang describes the ways in which the Chinese population is slowly becoming aware of climate warming and is beginning to tackle the issue through energy-saving measures. For the time being, the initiatives by Chinese NGOs are very limited in comparison with what is happening in the rest of the world, especially in India, even if they are heading towards expansion in the coming years. These initiatives are currently hampered by the political control over civil society in China, and by the lack of co-ordination between the different NGOs concerned with environmental matters. Nevertheless, the active participation of the population will become imperative, insofar as the war against climate warming will be waged in the field of energy saving, as Prime Minister Wen Jiabao has recently pointed out. •

• Translated by Jonathan Hall

2. Most of the developing countries have signed and ratified the Kyoto Protocol but, unlike the industrialised signatories, they do not have to keep within any greenhouse gas emission quotas.