



Received: 20 October 2017 | Revised: 27 November 2017 | Accepted: 28 November 2017

Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 34–46

doi: 10.1002/app5.217

Original Article

Coming to Terms with the Authoritarian Alternative: The Implications and Motivations of China's Environmental Policies

Mark Beeson *

Abstract

China has assumed a crucial importance in debates about climate change mitigation. On the one hand, China is one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gasses and pollution. On the other, it has invested more in renewable energy than any other country and is making real efforts to address the consequences of rapid industrialisation. There are three key questions for students of comparative political economy that emerge from the Chinese experience: first, what is the relationship between economic development and authoritarian rule? Second, what role has China's distinct social and political system played in creating and addressing environmental problems? Third, what domestic and international implications does the 'China model' have? In short, will China's authoritarian leaders be able to manage the expectations of its own people and those of the so-called international community? This article considers the often paradoxical and contradictory nature of the authoritarian Chinese government's current environmental policies and suggests that while they may have some success at the domestic level, they may still be an obstacle to international cooperation.

Key words: China, environmental policy, authoritarianism, policy implementation

* Political Science and International Relations, University of Western Australia, Perth 6009, Western Australia Australia; email <mark.beeson@uwa.edu.au>.

1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States has already proved a major setback for American leadership in the area of climate change mitigation in particular (Weaver 2017). It is also likely to overturn many of the most commonly held ideas about the potential basis of cooperation and leadership in the international system more generally. None may be more important than the possibility that China, rather than the United States, may actually be at the forefront of trying to maintain the modest progress that was made under the auspices of the Paris accord in 2016 (Schwartz 2016). It is striking that in the aftermath of Trump's election victory, China called on the United States to live up to its commitments, rather than vice-versa (Clark 2016). China's leaders have many reasons to be concerned: not only have environmental problems in China become much worse (Shapiro 2016) but they are also a growing source of social unrest and potential political instability (Anonymous 2016).

While it is impossible to say quite what impact Trump's election will have on climate change mitigation efforts, it is certain that China will continue to play a prominent role in determining environmental outcomes, if only because it is currently the world's largest emitter of CO₂ (Malm 2012). It is important, therefore, to consider the distinctive form that environmental policies have taken in China, both at the domestic and international levels. The underlying political, social and economic reality of climate change mitigation is that it

is technically and politically difficult. Policies will—if implemented ‘successfully’—have adverse impacts on a range of potentially powerful vested interests. Major policy change inevitably alters the rules of the game and creates winners and losers (Garnaut 2011), even in a more state-led economy such as China’s (Kostka 2015). The key issues to consider in this regard are the forces that are likely to shape environmental policies in authoritarian China at the domestic and international levels. In short, can China’s political system generate answers to its own environmental problems, let alone the world’s?

Research on China’s environmental problems, and the political context within which they are managed, has expanded rapidly recently, and this article draws heavily on some of this existing work. Less frequently considered, however, is the relationship between China’s domestic context and the sorts of policies and behaviors that are associated with China at the international level, where it has come to assume an ever more prominent and important role. After mapping some of the drivers of, and constraints on, domestic environmental policymaking, I consider how such processes are shaping foreign policy. The following discussion also provides an assessment of the some of the theoretical frameworks that have been developed to explain China’s distinctive approach to environmental policy, especially ‘environmental authoritarianism’ (EA) and deliberative democracy in a Chinese context.

The overall argument I develop in this article is that domestic considerations profoundly influence the conduct of all China’s external relations, including its environmental policies. Paying attention to the interplay between the international and the domestic—even if such terms are not as precise and illuminating as they once were—is essential if we are to develop plausible explanation for any state’s environmental policies. Moreover, unless China’s counterparts and interlocutors in the international policymaking community recognise and take heed of these domestic constraints, they will be unable to come to terms with the authoritarian alternative.

2. China’s Authoritarian Alternative

For many observers in the West, making sense of China’s historical experience presents a number of major problems over and above the immediate difficulties that flow from linguistic and cultural barriers. It is increasingly recognised that there is a pervasive Eurocentricism that often fails to acknowledge the profoundly different historical experiences that have shaped social, economic and political development outside of the core Western states that were largely responsible for developing industrial capitalism and liberal democracy (Hobson 2012). Consequently, there is an expectation that historical patterns elsewhere will ultimately replicate the Western experience and culminate in similar forms of political practice and economic structures. The reality in this context is that China or, more accurately, its ruling political and economic elites are showing no great enthusiasm about developing Western style democratic structures, especially if they present a threat to the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) monopolisation of political power. On the contrary, there has been a notable reassertion and centralisation of Party power under Xi Jinping, a process that has seen a concomitant crackdown on freedom of expression, greater control over the legal system, and restrictions placed on non-state actors (Callick 2017).

Perhaps some of these measures will prove to be short-lived expressions of a singularly powerful leader’s attempts to stave off the inevitable. However, it is important to note that even before Xi’s most recent attempts to consolidate power in himself and the Party, there was little sign of a major, structurally driven transformation of the political system of a sort that underpinned the rise of a politically powerful capitalist class in Europe. To be sure, there is no shortage of successful capitalists in ‘communist’ China, but they are not pushing for political liberalism. On the contrary, the most striking feature of the growing capitalist class in China is that it is perfectly happy to work closely with the CCP, as long as it is free to make money. Indeed, many successful business people are actually members of the

CCP and enjoy close, mutually enriching relationships with senior Party leaders (Tsai 2007; Wright 2010). Whatever environmental policies China adopts, therefore, will be produced in this distinctive authoritarian context.

2.1. Authoritarian Environmentalism

Despite Xi's crackdown on corruption, such relationships remain a key part of the China's very distinctive system. As has been the case in much of East Asia, the Chinese state has been an extremely powerful and influential force in driving development (Beeson 2014). As a consequence, not only do political and economic processes remain tightly connected but the state is also seen as having an entirely legitimate role to play in the management of the economy. The Chinese state has enjoyed a degree of 'performance legitimacy' that has given it an authority it otherwise lacks in the absence of a democratic mandate (Zhu 2011). As long as the state can continue to deliver economic development, there is no reason to think it cannot endure in its current form for the foreseeable future. This is, of course, the great unknown about China's political economy: there are now grounds for questioning whether the Chinese state and its hitherto highly successful technocrats can manage either the transition to a fully market economy or—more pertinently for the purposes of this discussion—the environmental impacts of rapid industrialisation and development.

One of the more established ideas in the literature about environmental politics is that there is a relationship between economic development and environmental consciousness. As living standards rise, the argument goes, the demand for better environmental management and the capacity to provide it increases, and environmental problems decline as a consequence (Beckerman 1992). However, there is generally a good deal of skepticism about the existence of a clear relationship between environmental problems such as pollution and rises in income (Stern 2004), despite some evidence showing a positive correlation in Asia (Apergis & Ozturk 2015). Even more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, there

are more generalised doubts about which political system is best placed to actually deal with such issues, whatever the overall standard of living may be.

While there is a good deal of persuasive evidence that democracies are associated with enhanced concern about, and interest in, addressing environmental problems (Neumayer 2002), the tangible consequences of different political structures are more ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the inevitable paradox that wealthier, generally more democratic, societies inevitably have a bigger environmental footprint and do more damage than their poorer counterparts—whatever their political system (Li & Reuveny 2006). Indeed, one of the more striking features of the current international economic order is 'ecologically unequal exchange' (Moran et al. 2013), in which the wealthier world outsources some of its environmental problems and impacts to the global south. Japan is, perhaps, the quintessential example of a country with a vastly improved domestic environment, but one that has been largely achieved at the expense of its neighbors in the region (Dauvergne 1997). On the other hand, it is evident that many democracies have great difficulty either overcoming powerful, entrenched domestic interests and generally following through on policy commitments, no matter how well intentioned they may be. As former Vice President Al Gore points out:

The inability of America's democracy to make difficult decisions is now threatening the nation's economic future—and with it the ability of the world system to find a pathway forward toward a sustainable future.... US self-government is now almost completely dysfunctional, incapable of making important decisions necessary to reclaim control, of its destiny' (Gore 2013: 119/20).

It is in this context of an international rollback of democratic reform on the one hand (Diamond 2008), and the simultaneous failure to deliver on environmental commitments in many of the world's leading democratic nations on the other (Klein 2014), that there has been a growing interest in EA.

For some observers (see Beeson 2010), EA is a possible, even likely, response to

intensifying environmental problems on the part of governments that are either already authoritarian, or which may find sustaining democratic rule increasingly difficult in the face of mounting problems. In this context, it is important to recognise that EA does not have to be judged more effective in managing environmental problems for it to persist. For others observers, however, EA is potentially a superior basis for public policy. Gilley (2012: 288), for example, argues that EA ‘can be provisionally defined as a public policy model that concentrates authority in a few executive agencies manned by capable and uncorrupt elites seeking to improve environmental outcomes’. This definition is reminiscent of the so-called ‘developmental state’ that was pioneered by Japan and reproduced with varying degrees of success across much of Asia—including China (Beeson 2014). The key question in this context is does China have the requisite ‘state capacity’, especially in the form of ‘uncorrupt’, technocratically competent elites to match or even outperform its democratic counterparts?

2.2. *Democratic Deliberation with Chinese Characteristics?*

At the outset, it is important to emphasise how counter-intuitive this question is, especially when seen from the perspective of Western political theory. There is, after all, an influential school of thought among Western observers which argues that sustainable environmental outcomes are more likely in a political context where a form of ‘deliberative democracy’ is central to the process of environmental management (Smith 2003). Even those observers who recognise the challenge of actually developing social structures in which deliberative democracy can occur argue that its principles provide a unique ‘critical vantage point’ from which to understand and deal with environmental problems (Eckersley 2000, p. 124). While there may be something in this, not least from a normative perspective, actually realising the conditions under which a Habermasian-style ‘ideal speech context’ could be constructed remains a formidable task (Deetz 1992), especially where powerful

vested economic interests can employ extensive resources to undermine such a possibility (Dunlap & McRight 2011).

The challenge of creating a political context within which such open-ended deliberative processes might be conducted in China seems intuitively implausible. It is no surprise, therefore, that some commentators dismiss the possibility given that it threatens the continuing authority and primacy of the Chinese state. Youwei (2015), for example, argues that

Small reforms are moving forward in some areas but none of them is transformational ... the first principle of legal reform as “asserting the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” Party officials frequently nod to the importance of “deliberative democracy,” and the party released a plan to “strengthen socialist deliberative democracy,” but it is unclear how deliberation can be made meaningful without ways of punishing institutional unresponsiveness.

And yet despite the apparent incompatibility of genuinely inclusive processes to determine policy outcomes with the continuing primacy of the Chinese state, some claim that not only is China’s political system based on functionally superior meritocratic principles but that it is actually also more likely to deliver good environmental outcomes than its democratic counterparts as a direct consequence. (Bell 2015, p. 54).

One of the more sophisticated and influential attempts to explain China’s political processes and their potential for developing more inclusive deliberative processes has been provided by He (2013). He and Warren (2011, p. 274) describe ‘authoritarian deliberation’ as ‘an ideal type of regime that combines concentrated power—that is, power not distributed to those affected by collective decisions—with deliberative communication.’ The key payoff for the authoritarian regime in this context is enhanced legitimacy as various stakeholders—and potential sources of social unrest—are included in a consultative process. According to He, such practices are part of long-standing cultural practices in a state with no history of democratic participation. The broad thrust of this argument is echoed by Gilley (2014, p. 121) who claims that ‘democracy in

Asia is conceived of as a means of strengthening the authority of the state.’ In other words, processes that led to a transformation of state–society relations in the West may actually reinforce the existing order in Asia.

But even if we accept the rather counter-intuitive proposition that China’s history and cultural practices may have generated a distinctive form of deliberative consultation with which to manage complex issues of public policy, it is far from clear whether this makes the Chinese state any more capable of actually addressing the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change, pollution, water scarcity and all of the other consequences of rapid industrialisation in the world’s most populous nation.

3. Environmental Authoritarianism in Practice

There are two aspects to China’s distinctive approach to environmental management: the domestic and the international. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it has been at the domestic level that its distinctive political practices and relationships have had the most impact thus far. But China’s sheer size combined with its possible role as an alternative non-democratic model of environmental adaptation gives it a much greater potential international significance. Indeed, Bell (2015, p. 36) argues that

if China continues to “meritocratize” and avoids the bad policy making stemming from voter ignorance in democratic countries (especially the United States, the powerful and populous country it is usually compared to), it will set a model for others.

This claim is looking rather more plausible in the aftermath of Trump’s election, but before we consider its merits, it is important to consider how well China’s version of EA has actually worked out in practice.

3.1. *Paradoxes of the Fragmented State*

Despite the efforts of Xi Jinping to consolidate personal power noted earlier, China is in some ways an unlikely candidate for the effective nationwide implementation of environmental

policies. The Chinese state has long been depicted as ‘fragmented’ (Lieberthal 1992) and lacking in the same sort of coherent, effective state capacity that distinguished Japan’s developmental state in its highly successful heyday (Beeson 2009; Howell 2006). As the Chinese proverb has it, the mountains are high and the emperor is far away: ensuring that edicts and initiatives from the centre are actually implemented at all in the far-flung provinces, let alone in the way that was actually intended, has been a perennial problem in China. It still is, as we shall see. And yet it is also apparent that—despite some recent stumbles—the central government in China has done a remarkably effective job of guiding economic development and the transition to a capitalist economy, albeit one with Chinese characteristics (Peck & Zhang 2013). The question is whether it can continue to do so and simultaneously manage the negative environmental impacts that flow from economic development.

One classic definition of state ‘strength’ suggests that it is dependent on the relationship between the political system and the wider society of which it is a part. States that have a capacity to ‘penetrate’ society and implement policy are judged strong (Migdal 1988). On this count, China looks rather weak given the state’s historical difficulties in ensuring policy implementation nationwide and in full. And yet it is also clear that the Chinese state generally enjoys a good deal of support despite its lack of democratic legitimacy (Zhong & Chen 2013), in part because it has itself been transformed by its interaction with society. Mertha (2009, p. 1001) argues that the state in China has shown a capacity to reform and adapt, allowing new entrants into the political process by ‘delegating responsibilities to economic, social and other types of actors ... under the rubric of “small state large society”’. In this regard, it is important to recognise that China’s undoubted economic success has been driven in part by a famously pragmatic approach that has involved a good deal of policy experimentation and learning (Heilmann & Perry 2011). The idea that the state might be willing to decentralise, share power or to rely

on technical and local expertise is not, therefore, inconceivable.

There are, however, internal constraints that limit the potential effectiveness of any state-led, top-down response to policy problems generally and to the environment in particular. Not only is the Chinese state composed of many different agencies and riddled with factional loyalties and patronage networks (Zeng 2015) but the Ministry of Environmental Protection is relatively new and lacks the power and influence of an agency such as the National Development and Reform Commission, which has overseen the implementation of industry policy in China (He et al. 2012). Even more importantly, perhaps, environmental issues are not linked to powerful economic interests of a sort that exert a major influence on domestic and foreign policy decisions (Brødsgaard 2012). Put differently, there is an absence of the sorts of institutionalized, powerful stakeholders who are capable of pushing for environmental reforms.

3.2. *The domestic scorecard*

Yet despite all of these institutionalized obstacles to reform, the central government has managed to oversee a 'significant decline' in domestic coal usage (Carrington 2016). In part, this transformation has been encouraged by growing social unrest in some of China's biggest cities, such as Beijing, where concern about air pollution has become a political issue. In such circumstances, China's authoritarian government has been able to mandate the closure of some of the most polluting industries or force their relocation to less politically sensitive regions (Butler 2015). When seen from a global perspective and China's perspective as a 'responsible stakeholder', the picture is cloudier, however. A number of China's State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and coal companies have shifted their operations to other parts of the region and, like Japan before it, exported some of its environmental problems to poorer neighbors (Forsythe 2015). At this level at least, the form of government seems less important than does the level of economic development.

At the domestic level, the tensions and difficulties facing China's governing elites are even starker. Despite developing what some observers call a form of 'consultative authoritarianism' in which technical expertise and local knowledge are recognised as potentially important parts of successful environmental management, central and local governments remain wary of the possibility that 'environmental activism could spiral into broader political complaint. This tension shapes the regulatory landscape' (van Rooij et al. 2014, p. 6). Some observers actually claim that this form of consultative authoritarianism and the expansion of civil society in China 'is not leading to a process of democratization but rather to better governance under the conditions of authoritarianism, which in turn is increasing citizen satisfaction with the regime.' (Teets 2013, pp. 20–21). While such differences of opinion are relatively subtle, they indicate the difficulty of making definitive judgments about an intersecting environmental and political process that is unfolding on a historically unprecedented scale and speed.

What is clearer, however, is that the outcome of this dialectical process, in which society and government are being directly affected by major environmental change, will be determined in part by the limitations of the state's internal policymaking processes and by its relationship to a rapidly expanding and evolving civil society. In this regard, there is a fundamental disjuncture in the incentive structures facing officials and cadres at the local level and the possible benefits that are likely to accrue at a more general societal (and global) level from successful environmental management. As Eaton and Kostka (2014, p. 360) point out,

local leaders, who bear responsibility for interpreting and carrying out environmental policies, typically have very short time horizons and are not strongly incentivized to take on the difficult business of changing lanes from a growth-at-any-cost model to a resource-efficient and sustainable path.

The career prospects of local official are geared to demonstrating immediate success

—invariably measured in terms of economic development—not in long-term sustainable outcomes, the value of which only become apparent after their architects may have moved on. In this context, local officials have a good deal of latitude in implementing environmental targets from the centre, with the consequence that ‘targets can become inappropriate, rigid, and inflated’ (Kostka 2015, p. 70).

The contradictory relationship with environmental non-government organizations (NGOs) in particular and civil society more generally may prove even more difficult for China’s authoritarian government to resolve. Some observers claim that the apparent engagement with civil society is ‘tokenistic’ and has ‘a negligible impact on environmental outcomes.’ (Johnson 2014, p. 243). Others conclude that NGOs have become important parts of environmental management that influence the policymaking process (Tan 2014), a process that is being actively reinforced by a more environmentally aware media and a concomitant raise in public consciousness in environmental issues (Steinhardt & Wu 2016). China’s changing domestic political conditions help to account for such differences of opinion, no doubt, the most important of which has been the growing crackdown on NGOs, domestic dissent and a revival of anachronistic ideological tropes (Zhang 2016). At this stage, it is impossible to predict how such tensions will be resolved or what their possible implications might be for politics in China, but regime change and/or collapse cannot be ruled out (Shambaugh 2016).

Given that there is a fundamental uncertainty about the domestic context within which policy of all sorts is being made in China, its role as a responsible stakeholder in the international system is equally difficult to predict with any confidence. We can, however, consider its recent role in climate change negotiations and its foreign policy goals more generally to get some idea of the impact of the world’s most important authoritarian state on environmental outcomes.

4. Dealing with the Authoritarian Alternative

China’s record in international climate change negotiations—practically and symbolically the most important expression of potential international cooperation—is not good. China is most widely known for its role in the abortive Copenhagen summit (COP 15), in which it was widely judged to have played an obstructive role that was central to the meeting’s subsequent failure (Christoff 2010). There are signs now, however, that China may be willing to play a more constructive—even a leadership—role in promoting international cooperation, in part because the United States may not (Wong 2016). But in order to understand why its representatives behaved as they do, and to gauge the likely course of China’s future international role, it is necessary to consider its overall approach to foreign policy, the forces that shape it and the goals it is designed to realise. The key question in this context is reminiscent of its domestic dilemmas: are authoritarian China’s institutions and objectives compatible with an open-ended process of negotiation that is designed to produce optimal environmental outcomes, or will implacable political priorities foreclose important and necessary policies?

4.1. Foreign policy in China

Like everything else about China, there are differing opinions about the objectives of Chinese foreign policy. This is explained, in part, by the fact that China’s foreign policymaking processes are notoriously and deliberately opaque (Beeson & Li 2014). What is less in doubt is the fact that China’s foreign policy elites and the policies they espouse are very different from those of 30 or 40 years ago when China was primarily seen as a source of destabilizing revolutionary ideology. Now by contrast, China has the second largest economy in the world, and there are growing expectations both inside and outside China that it could and should play a role in keeping with its material importance (Liu 2016).

It is routinely suggested that in a supposedly global era, the distinctions between foreign and

domestic policy, or ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, are becoming increasingly blurred and methodologically redundant (Agnew 1994). This dialectical interaction between the formerly discrete realms of foreign and domestic policy has culminated in what Putnam (1988) famously described as ‘two-level games’. The challenge for policymakers everywhere is to craft policy responses that take the new political dynamics seriously. This is an especially salient consideration in authoritarian China where domestic pressures and the need to ensure the continuing authority and legitimacy of an unelected regime are paramount. Ironically, this may mean that the state is potentially even more constrained when it comes to making foreign policy than many of its democratic counterparts. While states everywhere may be preoccupied with pursuing what they perceive to be the ‘national interest’ in China’s case, domestic institutional constraints, a rising tide of nationalism and unresolved historical grievances give foreign policy a particular importance. Reestablishing China’s position at the centre of international affairs is consequently one of the regime’s primary goals, even if it is not always obvious how this will be realised or what China would do if it achieves it (Deng 2008; Shambaugh 2013).

To make sense of China’s possible impact on global climate change mitigation—which is, after all, the sort that is ultimately necessary—it is important to distinguish between the immediate impact of China’s foreign policy and its more diffuse impacts in multilateral forums and as a potential role model for other non-Western emerging market economies. When it comes to China’s direct impact on environmental issues close to home, the prospects for ‘win-win’ cooperation of a sort that is rhetorically championed by many policymakers and commentators in China are not encouraging. In what is one of the most intractable and complex problems facing China and its neighbors—how to manage cross-border resource and sustainability issues—China has demonstrated little willingness to compromise national interests. Agreement on how to manage the Mekong River, for example, which has its origins in China and which

is a vital resource for China’s South-east Asian neighbours such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, remains elusive. An indication of China’s attitude to this issue and multilateralism more generally is captured by Chellaney (2012, p. 150) who argues that

China rejects the notion of water sharing or institutionalized cooperation with downstream countries. Whereas riparian neighbors in Southeast and South Asia are bound by water pacts that they have negotiated between themselves, China does not have a single water treaty with any co-riparian country.... while promoting multilateralism on the world stage, China has given the cold shoulder to multilateral cooperation among river-basin states.

In some ways, China’s stance in this context is in keeping with its foreign policy more generally. Although our understanding of the policymaking process in China is far from perfect, it is clear that there has been a major shift over the last few years; a change that coincides with Xi Jinping’s ascension to the presidency (Shi 2015). The most dramatic and dangerous expression of this possibility is the increasingly assertive, not to say aggressive, pursuit of China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea (Forsythe & Perlez 2016; Kaplan 2014). It is also important to note that these claims are not only about national status and the strategic rivalry with the United States. The South China Sea is also rich in vital energy and food resources that could play an important part in underpinning the current regime’s ‘ecological fix’, or the particular manner that competing economic, political and environmental forces are reconciled—at least temporarily (see Bakker 2009).

4.2. *China as a Responsible Stakeholder*

Plainly, global environmental problems cannot be resolved through force of arms or coercion, even if this may provide part of a short-term fix in response to especially acute and immediate problems (Homer-Dixon 1994; Campbell et al. 2007). If China is to play the sort of role as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ that was urged upon it by former president of the World Bank

Robert Zoellick (2005), it will be largely determined by the nature of China's cooperation in multilateral institutions, especially those that are intended to deal with environmental problems. Once again, the evidence is contradictory, but some things are becoming clearer.

First, the great hope and expectation among many Western observers that China's elites would be 'socialised' by their participation in the preexisting institutional architecture created under the auspices of American hegemony only seems likely to be partially realised (see Johnston 2008). Truly, China is no longer a source of revolutionary ideology, but it is clear that there are limits to how far China's elites are willing to go in their embrace of multilateralism. It is also evident that China has its own ideas about what the normative and policy content of international regimes should be. On the one hand, China has shown a marked unwillingness to multilateralise its disputes in the South China Sea or accept independent adjudication. On the contrary, Chinese policymakers would prefer to exploit their economic and strategic advantages of weaker states in bilateral relations (Beeson 2016). On the other hand, China's leaders are developing their own ideas what multilateral institutions should do (Chan et al. 2012). In part, this reflects unhappiness about the prevailing order and what is seen as China's under-representation within them. Indeed, so dissatisfied is China with the prevailing order that it has begun to develop its own in parallel (Ren 2016).

The reality would seem to be that not only has the degree of socialisation that has occurred in China has been rather superficial but that it may be far from unidirectional. China's policymaking elites seem to take an entirely instrumental approach to international cooperation: they are willing to take part in multilateral institutions and even agreements but only as a means to pursuing what are still essentially *national* interests (Heilmann & Schmidt 2014). In other words, as Qin (2014, p. 309) points out, 'the security of the state and political system is the most important consideration in designing China's international strategy'. This may not rule out the possibility

of international environmental cooperation, but it will be driven by essentially national imperatives. China's policymakers may increasingly seek to make international organizations reflect their vision of the world and priorities, rather than those cultivated by the West under the auspices of American hegemony—even if they lack a coherent and clear vision of precisely what those priorities might be at this stage (Beeson & Li 2016).

Again, this may not preclude the possibility of meaningful international cooperation in principle. However, we also need to recognise that the same sorts of institutionalized constraints apply to China's policymaking capacities at the international level as they do domestically. One of the reasons the Chinese played such an obstructive role at the COP 15 summit, for example, was because its negotiators simply did not have the skills or authority to play the sort of role that the occasion demanded. As Conrad (2012, p. 443) notes, 'the Chinese domestic system leaves virtually no scope for positions to be significantly adjusted on the spot during international negotiations.' In part, this reflects the hierarchical structure of China's policymaking processes and a concern about making 'mistakes' at a time when ideological control is being actively re-imposed. In part it reflects an enduring suspicion of the impact of 'American hegemonism' and the possibility that the extant system does not reflect or further Chinese national interests (Deng 2001; Zeng et al. 2015). The general point to make is that there are still major institutional, ideological and political constraints shaping China's engagement with the world that may make it what Shambaugh (2013) calls a 'partial power' for the foreseeable future.

5. Concluding Remarks

China remains something of an enigma. The simple reality is that there has never been another country quite like China. Much the same could be said about any country, perhaps, but China's sheer size, longevity and recent success—at least when measured in terms of economic development—make it unique and sui

generis. Making predictions about its likely future political, economic or environmental trajectory is especially challenging as a consequence. What we can say is that for now, at least, China's particular variety of authoritarian rule shows no sign of disappearing. Nor do China's environmental problems. On the contrary, despite some encouraging signs—China is the largest investor in renewable energy, for example (Crooks 2015)—its environmental challenges remain on an epic scale (Buckley 2015), like everything else about this remarkable country. At this stage, it is not clear whether growing environmental problems are likely to make the durability of authoritarianism more or less likely in the longer term, but it is far from certain that democratic rule is the inevitable endpoint of China's millennia long political odyssey either.

This means that China's people and the rest of the world will have to deal with the authoritarian alternative; state-led, non-democratic efforts to manage environmental problems at both the domestic and international levels. As far as China's leaders are concerned, there is absolutely no doubt that the domestic element of this equation will take precedence. Again, much the same might be said about their democratic counterparts, perhaps, but in China's case, the costs of domestic failure may be politically terminal for the CCP and its particular variety of authoritarian rule. This does not mean that it will be replaced by democracy. On the contrary, democracy seems to be in something of a retreat internationally, as are the rather demanding geopolitical, social and economic conditions that allow it to flourish (*The Economist* 2016). Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that China makes a peaceful transition to something like the Singaporean model, in which elites from the CCP have taken a great interest, but which might be very difficult to transfer to China's very different political and geographical circumstances (Ortmann & Thompson 2014). A political implosion and the chaos that will inevitably result would not be good for China or its long-suffering environment.

Indeed, one of the more sobering lessons from the Chinese experience is that political

and economic imperatives are likely to continue taking precedence over environmental ones, at least in the immediate future. China's leaders are not unique in this regard either, but the stakes are higher in China, and this may limit the scope its policymakers have for the sorts of far-reaching patterns of cooperation that seem necessary if the world is to address problems that necessitate collective actions on a planetary scale. In this context, the omens are not good because China's leaders—like their counterparts in much of the Asian region—remain highly sensitive about possible infringements of national sovereignty.

Paradoxically enough, therefore, individual nation-states, no matter how they may be organised internally, remain critical components of any meaningful effort to address transnational problems. The challenge in this context is to make sure they are part of the solution and not the principal obstacles to reform. Authoritarian regimes are not necessarily either better or worse in this regard. Much depends on the ability and willingness of ruling elites everywhere to address complex environmental challenges with the urgency they merit. In this regard, China's policymakers seem to realise that their own immediate political prospects are likely to be determined in large part by their capacity to either make real progress in actually fixing environmental problems, or controlling the all-too-likely social unrest if they fail.

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